Marie

And The Halls Beyond

a novella by

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Second Edition

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PROLOGUE

chapter 1

She did not remember being here at all.

Her mind was fuzzy after just waking up. She sat upright on a sofa, its hue matching her short brunette hair.

Marie could see another woman wearing a white coat over a beige T-shirt, who also used a pin to shorten her pale blue hair. Marie saw her own office attire.

Long bulbs hummed faintly. File cabinets. Constructivist painting. A potted shrub in the nearby corner. There was transparent glass in front of the woman. The azure room had subtle horizontal and vertical gridlines.

“Welcome to the afterlife.”

“What... part of the afterlife?”

“The reception area.”

“What?”

“Sorry, I meant the reception area of what you humans call a ‘purgatory’.”

That didn’t make it any better.

“I don’t really remember dying...

Oh well, this place is probably better than Earth.”

The receptionist held a metal tablet, tapped on it a few times, and read an entry.

“Your name is Marie L. Sebastian. Twenty-six. Female. Caucasian origin. Arrival: December 20, 2103.

Looks like we’re still alive, even after all those things.”

“Still there. Still prolonging the pain. My parents keep saying that life sucks, yet they’re the ones who gave birth to me. The world rants about suffering, yet we keep prolonging life anyways. For no logical reason.”

Heather glanced at Marie. Three seconds of silence. She got back to checking her tablet.

“Alright.”

“Uh, don’t take that the wrong way. My parents have their own backstories and they’re still quite warm to me. I just dislike some parts of them.”

The receptionist momentarily changed her focus.

“Interesting story.

My name is Heather.”

“Heather…?”

“No full name. Extra space for paperwork, especially when numbers already exist.”

Marie exhaled.

“Great. I died and I’m still in an office.”

“Nobody earns currencies in here and occupants have equal roles, so don’t worry about a caste system. This place looks like an office because it’s familiar to humans, and the original form wasn’t as interesting… somehow.”

Heather scratched her lower right face.

“I’ll elaborate. To process millions of people at once, the Beyond naturally slows time and creates purgatories tailored for recipients like you and handlers like me. It designed this realm, and we barely understand it.

The Beyond isn’t the afterlife. It’s an infinite, invisible force that places souls here to receive judgment from

the handler committee. It exists because the universe had to randomly exist and produce life.

And like the universe, the afterlife expands infinitely to meet the demands of the growing population, and no human system can outmanage the Beyond. Besides, it cannot be modified or controlled by us."

"...I think I got all that."

Marie thought she behaved a bit weird. A bit too clean. Then again, the afterlife seemed like it was designed by a corporate snob, so this behavior would come naturally. Or "artificially", you could even say. She would just have to tolerate it and remember office lingo again.

The handler interacted with the tablet.

"As part of newcomer procedures, we will have a tour on the different realms of the afterlife and their subareas. We are currently in the Halls of Development, the realm dividing the Halls of Infamy and the Halls of Fame."

"So purgatory, hell, and heaven?"

"Yes. Those are Earth words though, and occupants of the afterlife already organized these terms."

A few seconds later, Heather stood up from her swivel chair and walked until she was in front of Marie.

"We'll start from the worst realm, the Halls of Infamy, then the shortest, the Halls of Development, to the more constructive one, the Halls of Fame. This way, we pass through the hard things first then build up from it."

Heather analyzed Marie again.

"Let us finally go to the Ten Halls of Infamy."

"You mean nine circles of hell?"

"No, Ten Halls of Infamy."

"Nine circles?"

"Ten Halls of Infamy. Ten Halls. TEN.

I keep hearing this from other people, for decades now. It's that stupid poem. Honestly, why would ANYONE want to read old Shakespearean gibberish?!"

Heather breathed rapidly as if she just had a marathon, and Marie sat there with her eyes widened. The handler realized it and timidly repositioned herself.

“Pardon me.

Those years of being processed haven't really erased my loathing for archaic literature.”

“No worries. It's a pattern. New stuff makes fun of old stuff, and newer stuff makes fun of new stuff. Just like how I want to make fun of you right now.”

Heather was understandably annoyed. Marie continued to pester her anyways.

“So, is this gonna be a glorified onboarding session?”

“If you prefer to use that term. I'm inclined to agree.”

“And what's the tenth one?”

“I wouldn't want to give you spoilers. You'll see soon.

Can we go? We're already off schedule by four minutes.”

“Yeah.”

“Follow me.”

Heather paced herself towards the far part of the room. Marie hesitated, tugged at her sleeves, then stood.

She spotted Heather opening a door, which revealed a corridor lined with ten paintings and Corinthian pillars. Eventually, they got inside.

“Where’s this hell of yours?

Is this it? Seems small and boring.”

“No, this is just a museum display for newcomers. It’d be a logistical nightmare to manage two Halls of Infamy at the same time. The Halls of Fame are safe for on-ground visit though, and we’re in the Halls of Development.”

“So there’s bureaucracy. Makes sense this is hell.

Can I file a complaint to God? Maybe I was misplaced.”

“Complaint forms are on page 42 of the handbook. And no personnel named ‘God’ is in the committee.”

“Meaning?”

“There is no god.”

Marie had to pause after that.

“Oh.”

“The displays come with ‘antennas’ that allow my tablet to create real-time projections for each of the halls, so they’d be easier to visualize for recipients.

The Halls of Infamy are a very horrifying place for the unprocessed soul. After a brief explanation, we’ll only settle in one hall for a few seconds.”

Heather reviewed her tablet before proceeding.

“I will go through all of these as quick as possible, so as to not waste your time.”

“Yeah, because rush hour still exists after you die.”

This will be a long day.

THE HALLS OF INFAMY

chapter 2

“The Halls of Infamy represent our human limitations driven to the extreme. We are all susceptible to these since we all have human nature, regardless of ideology and stance. Our varying intensities just differentiate us.

Of course, special circumstances are taken note of, and they won’t be judged harshly, such as those with severe mental, physical, or resource handicaps.

However, those who lived most of their lives aligned with these limitations, with little to no improvement or with deliberate dysfunction, get sent in here without being considered for the Halls of Development.”

Heather presented the first painting to Marie. It showed a red brick wall.

“Looks just like my boss.”

“Exactly. This is for the **Hall of Ignorance**, representing the human limitation of not acquiring enough knowledge about the world, sometimes even willingly, despite all the information around us.

The souls who reside here include pop culture fanatics, hyperconsumers, and the worst kinds of alcoholics.”

The handler glanced at the tablet, then at Marie.

“May I show the hall?”

“Sure, I guess.”

Heather tapped a button. The Hall of Ignorance, in all its glory. Radiant colors served as the sky, excessively illuminating the vibrant dance floor, while monochrome color wheels spun as fast as a tornado. There was faint, upbeat disco music playing for a party atmosphere.

Marie was not prepared for this amount of stimulation.

“They are punished using rapidly switching colors paired with black and white spirals, resembling the effect of drugging yourself and the hypnotizing allure of comfort.

Ignorance is bliss, they say.”

“How can you even last a few seconds opening your eyes here? Mine would explode, I’m sure this would make for a good weapon against epileptics.”

“That’s the point. They will never open their eyes, even with these illusions, for the rest of their afterlives.”

Marie stared at her expressionless face.

“Wow. That’s actually horrible.”

“Nope, there’s worse.”

“What.”

Heather used the tablet and they got back to the corridor. Marie had to blink a couple of times and hold her temple with her right hand.

“Thank you for doing that. My mind hurts now.”

“As I said, unprocessed souls will have a hard time here. So brace yourself for more.”

Heather approached the second painting, while Marie lagged behind. It showed a bubble.

“The next hall is the **Hall of Groupthink**. While groupthink can be used for good, say pursuing changes and raising awareness, groupthink is usually a bad vice to practice.

It’s when you have an unchecked belief that the voice of your group is better than the voices of the other groups. Ignoring new info that challenges your rigid identity.”

“Pretty much sums up social media and politics.”

"Yeah, but we still have our backgrounds, so groupthink is hard to pinpoint. Everyone has a soapbox anyways.

They might appear loud or exaggerated, especially in mass media where messages can be propagated more. But when left with fewer people and when you approach them kindly, they won't seem as obnoxious. It's usually when you provoke them that they stay close-minded.

'Shallow' people might even be warm or complex deep down, and they're just facing their own pains and societal expectations. Just like your parents."

Marie was busy looking at the other paintings until this was said.

"Groupthink is typically a shield for someone, to expand their identity and control over their part of the world. Because groups make people look bigger, which they can't really do by themselves, you rarely see them alone.

To feel like they belong, to feel better about themselves, to feel a sense of purpose no matter how aimless it is, to feel like they're finally doing something right in their life. Always looking for things to blame their pains on but not considering themselves.

And maybe they're even worse behind people's backs."

Marie was getting uneasy. Maybe she was also being studied, not just the other way around.

“Here lies McCarthy supporters, football fans, CERTAIN F1 communities, yellow journalists, users from the worst subreddits, and performative environmentalists who shout a lot yet can’t check other ideas, understand a single Wikipedia page, or provide an actionable enough solution for the problems they seem to care about.”

Heather observed that Marie was squinting.

“You didn’t have to write an essay there.”

“...That’s, what it said in the archives.”

Heather showed her the tablet. The sixth example does say: “Performative environmentalists who shout a lot yet can’t check other ideas, understand a single Wikipedia page, or provide an actionable enough solution for the problems they seem to care about”, written like that probably because the archivists had too much free time.

Marie wanted to challenge or, more specifically, troll her. The brunette leaned in, grinning.

“So, what would be YOUR solution, huh?”

“Hey! I didn’t write this. But... alright, I’ll try.

Renewables with nuclear fusion...? Better carbon tax? Come on, this topic is too complex and unrelated.”

“Renewables are still the new Big Oil, loopholes exist, nuclear seems fine but it’s another industry waiting to–”

“Can I just display this hall already?”

“Sure.”

A button was pressed. The hall. It was a dimly lit expanse of sepia tiles. There was no sun, instead replaced by multiple strobes that glow in the dark. Almost empty.

“They are currently being punished through isolation, making this hall the emptiest and the most silent. You might not see them but they’re just far apart, separated by force fields as shown by those blue and red things.

They spent so much time with their in-groups, now they lost everything that made up their shallow identities.”

Marie was intrigued by this premise, but definitely not horrified like earlier.

"I remember my dad telling me stories where everyone actually did something like this, for like a few years and people wore masks for some reason.

I guess this isn't that bad."

"Yeah. Try doing that for an infinite amount of time."

"I'm sure Buddhists wouldn't mind."

"Which is exactly why they aren't here.

We're stalling a lot in this hall, let's just go back."

With the flick of another button, the two were back in the corridor. Heather rushed to the third painting, and Marie saw that it had a soapbox.

"Jeez, even these paintings are boring."

"Shush.

Anyways, this is for the third hall, the **Hall of Superiority**. Not exactly like groupthink, but the worst aspect of it. We all have ego since it's part of our identity, which can even be good since it builds confidence and courage to pursue things in life. This hall is just for those who had excess.

When our identity gets provoked, we usually compare it with others and frame them as worse. Or the other way when you're self-loathing, but not these people.

These militant theists, atheists, agnostics, antinatalists, natalists, they can all be found in this hall. Don't forget Twitter users, commentary Youtubers, and so-called 'freethinkers' who aren't free from the labels they use.

Actually, anyone militant can be found here, especially the loud political nutjobs. Even centrists aren't safe.

I guess we all didn't want politics in our lives anyways, society just forced us to do so. But still, you don't have to be THAT loud and self-righteous."

Marie scoffed due to the irony of Heather's words.

"It's so easy to call people out from a soapbox, isn't it?"

Heather just rolled her eyes.

"Keep this up and I'll get my superiors to send you here."

"Yeah, what's SO bad about it?"

Heather tapped a button with her eyes fixed at Marie.

There were a lot of echoes. A lot. It was so loud, the laughs would have permanently deafened Marie if she stayed there for a few days. It was a simple room with a faint gray, like a gigantic maximum-security prison. The occupants winced and covered their ears, but nothing worked. Metallic tentacles held giant flat screens that showed brief flashes of their most painful memories.

Needless to say, Marie regretted that rhetorical question earlier. Heather crossed her arms with the tablet in the left hand, smiling at Marie.

“Yep. I thought so.

These people–”

“WHAT?! WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?!”

Heather forgot it again. She lowered the volume of the projection, then returned to doing that thing with her arms. At least Marie could listen to her sass now.

“Like I was saying... these people are punished through humiliation and constant reminders of their weakest, most awkward points in life.

That’s what they get for trying to up everyone else when they’re just as vulnerable, or even more dysfunctional.”

Marie had her jaw open. Heather took advantage of this.

“Go ahead. Laugh at them.

These sinners deserve it.”

A brief pause.

“No thanks, I’ll pass…”

Heather, her arms still crossed and eyes still on Marie, activated the exit button. Right after the arrival, Heather adjusted the volume for the next projection. Meanwhile, Marie remained shocked and appalled.

“They’re stuck there… for all eternity.”

“Yes. All eternity.

Better watch your mouth next time.”

Heather started going towards the fourth painting. Marie had twitched her left eye a few times before snapping back to reality… or at least this reality.

The painting showed a structure resembling a bank.

“The fourth one is the Hall of Self-Interest. Greed, envy, gluttony, lust… every sin in the Bible is here. We all have self-interest, regardless of stance and even class. The hall is for those who focused on obsessing over these interests rather than being more selfless with them.

You know the drill. Politicians. Multi-billionaire CEOs like those from Apple, Tencent, or Nestlé. Specific personnel from ‘nonprofits’ and ‘charities’ like Greenpeace, Blue Shield, or the Catholic Church. We also have ‘socialist’ public figures, pimps, MAPs, Sharpton…”

“Bureaucrats…”

Heather noticed and she had to look at Marie again.

“I don’t think handlers fit within those seven sins. I have been processed after all.

Anyways, the handler committee still waits for the last BlackRock executives on Earth. The Beyond doesn’t give us the ability to interfere with the lower universe, maybe because it would mess up humanity’s sense of reality.

We got Enron though. And some people involved with the electoral college and the CCP.”

Heather realized she had forgotten something.

"Oh yeah, the punishment. The hall is too broad so we just set them all on fire."

Both were abruptly put into the hall. The two figures darkened in contrast to the relentless flames ahead of them. Bright orange, with stalactites and caverns around the occupants burning there. Marie heard the screams of agony and her body recoiled with quick breathing.

Then, Heather used the tablet to send them back. Marie was still speechless, so the handler spoke.

"I know. That hall is completely unoriginal. Let's go to something a bit more unique."

It took a while for Marie, but a few steps later, they saw the next painting. It showed a black hole.

"The Hall of Despair is the fifth of them. While sadness is good for self-reflection and realism, being consumed by it leads to immense hopelessness and inaction.

This is deeper than the first four halls because it involves being aware of yourself, others, and existence. That's harder to counteract than traditional human limitations.

The hall doesn't have specific examples, since it's just occupied by depressed people who failed to look beyond

their self-defeating cycles for most of their lives. But not every depressed person is sent here, and those who tried were put in the Halls of Development."

Heather stared at the floor.

"We know what these people face, so we tried to 'help' them. They'll be talking with mental health professionals using infinite cloning, but their despair keeps them from seeing the other way, so they're stuck here forever."

The hall was shown. A white facility full of employees with whiter attire. There was one employee and desk per occupant. Lots of chatter, some shouts, and some cries.

"You should send these psychologists to Earth instead."

"As I said, the Beyond doesn't-"

"I was being sarcastic."

Heather became silent, then resumed talking.

"Oh. I'm usually decent at spotting this kind of humor. It's part of my portfolio after all."

"You get a PhD for analyzing humor?"

"No, but it's a course in the Halls of Fame, and all courses there are optional. We'll get to this realm later.

Our discussion is getting irrelevant again, let's go."

And just like that, they returned. Heather started walking until Marie asked a question.

"So, uh, you've been here for like..."

"About 416 years. That's how long I've been a volunteer for the Halls of Development. I've done this procedure for almost every single day of that duration."

Marie was astounded. Four centuries in a monotonous office space? At least you could die on Earth.

"Makes sense how you just stare at hell and not feel anything anymore."

"It's intended by the processing stage, so souls won't go insane when they live for eternity. Boredom is massively inhibited, fortunately."

"And yet you sound boring."

"...Okay then.

Trust me, if this is boring to you, check out the other handlers. I usually perform like them with my recipients but you seemed more laid-back and interesting, so I tried to add more flavor for you."

"Vanilla flavor."

"Yup."

Heather smiled a bit.

"Let's go to the next display."

Marie and Heather walked towards the painting, which showed a sea urchin.

"This is the upgraded version of despair: The Hall of Resentment. Whereas despair is quiet and personal, resentment is reactive and more concerned with other people. Resentment not only pushes away connection and empathy, but it actively destroys the two.

It's something our society has: resentment towards the system, other people, our family, former acquaintances, the past, present, future... There are a lot of variations. But deep down, they all have something in common: a longing for connection and empathy."

Heather rechecked the tablet for a few seconds, before speaking again.

“Like despair, this hall doesn’t involve specific groups because the name speaks for itself: this is for the people who had too much resentment in their lives. They will keep denying their vulnerabilities and hurt others until they’re consumed by all the hate they throw and get.”

When the button was tapped, the hall appeared. A faint supergiant, planets, and some stars, if they were stars. What stood out in the magenta sky were the city-wide mirrors floating above the desert landscape, with small tepuis and crowds of people. Pleas for help. Weeping.

“They are forced to confront their own thoughts, with the mirrors reflecting their bitterness sevenfold.”

“After everything I’ve seen so far, this one isn’t too bad.”

“Want to try it with your own pocket mirror? They grow out of the ground here so there’s no need to pay. My tablet can generate a sample for you.”

Marie was surprised.

“I-I, uhh, no please.”

“It would be an educational experience.”

“No. Please.”

Heather narrowed her eyes towards Marie and had a curious expression. She didn’t even have to glance at the tablet to initiate the exit function.

“Alright.”

Both rushed towards the next painting. It was a replica of “Scream” by Edvard Munch.

“Did you get a copyright strike for displaying this?”

“You’re funny.

No, Edvard resides in the Halls of Fame and he allowed it. The afterlife might be bureaucratic to you, but it’s not a braindead monster.”

“At least that’s a saving grace.”

“You just won’t run out of quips, would you?”

“Yes.”

Heather groaned a bit.

“You’re lucky I’m your handler. Now can we continue?”

“Absolutely.”

Marie was enjoying that face a bit too much.

“The seventh hall is the **Hall of Delusion**. It’s resentment taken to the next level. When you’ve drowned yourself in bitterness and realize you don’t have much control over your world, it’s natural to create illusions to cope.

We’re all guilty of this since we make our own narratives in understanding the world. But people with delusion are worse since their narratives are FAR from reality.

They label people, twist facts or other narratives for their own good, and project their illusions to their way of life, rejecting reality in exchange for control and simplicity.”

Marie noticed that Heather stared at the tablet again.

“The people here failed to realize that it’s impossible to control everything. They failed to realize they already have their own part of the world, and they should do what they can with it rather than trying to control more.”

There was another pause.

"We have specific groups again. We got the Kim Jong Un 'bots' and apologists, flat earthers, bigots, black white supremacists, antivaxxers, and Posadists.

Then there are directors and writers of 'political dramas' and 'documentary' films based on 'true stories'. Classic Hollywood. And the masses are still falling for that."

"...Religious people?"

"Surprisingly, no. At least they believed that the afterlife existed, even though they got it wrong. Especially bigots and suicide bombers. But I did see religious people who used their beliefs for good. Got into their 'heaven'."

Heather studied Marie again.

"Want to see how the occupants here are punished?"

"No...?"

"Too bad."

Heather sent Marie and herself to this hall. Both the ground and the ceiling were made of brittle sedimentary

material, as if it was an oversized cave. Somehow, there were thin cirrus clouds and a pale-green light source. Arachnids with mile-long limbs hung above, releasing smaller infants that latch onto the hall's occupants. The soundscape was drowning in screaming yet again.

"By the way, those small spider things? Once they start leeching off the soul, the host gets flooded with much more intense delusions based on the host's mind.

They wanted these delusions, we'll give 'em more."

Marie couldn't even speak.

"Similar to the Hall of Resentment, you can get a free pet of your own. If you want."

Marie wasn't having it. Literally. And figuratively. Heather noticed, of course, so she explained further.

"Don't worry, once you tame them, they'll follow you in every move you take so you'll never lose them."

Marie could only mutter.

"Please let me out of here."

Heather smirked towards this hall, while Marie trembled and had her jaw lowered. Again.

There was a faint voice in the background that Heather couldn't hear much.

"You got it all wrong! I was misplaced here! My name is Adolph, not-"

Heather cut off the projection and they were back. Marie was still static, again, so Heather needed to barge in.

"Hey. Hey."

Heather snapped her fingers in front of Marie. Thrice. Marie finally got out of it and shook her head.

"You have water, here? I need it to recover from, this stuff.

Wait... how come I'm not thirsty yet? Back on Earth, I kept returning to the water dispenser in my workplace, and do you have one here? It's a famous office aesthetic."

"No, we don't have water dispensers. We're just souls; we might have limitations, but we don't need food or water.

The Beyond keeps us human-like though, so we won't go insane when we all float or turn into some blob figure.

What we DO have, are these."

Heather grabbed a tablet-like object in her tablet.

"What's that? A tic tac?"

"We call it the enrichment pill. Pleasing for processed souls, especially handlers who have to deal with people like you every day.

It's got enrichment! Comes in three flavors: processed orange, minty vanilla, and smooth jazz! Order now!"

Marie was confused by her sudden enthusiasm. Heather picked up on that, quietly returned the pill in the tablet, and commented on what just happened.

"Sorry, their tagline is a bit ingrained in my mind.

We do have coffee and water in the Halls of Fame, which we'll get to later."

"The more you say that, the more I want to visit it, maybe order a frappe as well."

Heather just shrugged on that side comment.

The women walked towards the eighth painting. It had a mushroom cloud.

"This is the Hall of Fury, the eighth hall. It's delusion put into real action, which is obviously worse. Since delusion isn't enough to actually change the world, some get frustrated. Detached. Violent. I think you get the point.

Anger can lead to a temporary form of superiority and control, since it makes you look bigger to others and you won't feel as vulnerable. But two angry people meeting each other would result in one unmovable mess.

We got Henry Kissinger, along with other controversial military leaders and their subordinates. There's Zedong, Stalin, Gaddafi, Mussolini, Hirohito, don't forget about the Notorious Hitler. And we have suicide bombers to top it all off, of course."

Heather just had a thought out of nowhere.

"It's interesting to think how these ideologies have a logo, as if they're organizations run by leaders and followers. All with their own recruitment methods. All with their own 'utopias' so outsiders fall for it.

That's why we never wanted the afterlife to have a logo, even if it might look like a business to you. We want to limit this kind of behavior."

Marie nodded.

"Anyways, Thatcher and Reagan were considered but it was ultimately dropped, instead sent to the Hall of Self-Interest. Lenin and Castro were also hard to categorize, so we just banished them to the Hall of Groupthink.

This is less on political leaning and more on neutrality. The handler committee encourages to remove emotions during final judgment to focus on the soul's dossier. To ensure that their punishment is based on their actions, contexts, and intentions. Not their label."

The handler observed Marie to check if she was still there somehow. There was a lack of her usual response.

Heather continued.

"I know there's more nuance, and these figures are very ideologically different... but we already tried, and four similar halls were more difficult to micromanage.

Most Halls of Fame occupants wanted them to face dire consequences, so we did what the people wanted.

What consequences you may ask?"

"I didn't ask."

Heather tapped the button anyways.

The hall was filled to the brim with liquid. Not water, but something else. It was neon blue. By this point, we know it's probably terrible.

Marie panicked as she didn't expect being "underwater" and she didn't want to drown. Heather reassured her.

"Don't worry, we're just in a projection. We aren't there; we're still in the corridor. We just 'teleport' to places."

Marie took a while to comprehend this, and it still didn't erase the fears.

"These sinners are constantly drowning in what we call the 'absolutism fluid', infinite gallons of it as the liquid expands on its own for the demands of this hall.

What it does is pacify the ruthless minds of these people, then create a painful burning sensation that mimics the rage their bodies used to have. Since they're pacified, they can't do anything about it. Until the end of time."

Marie had that face. Again.

“Can we get out now?”

“Sure, I also don’t want to prolong our schedule.”

The two were back in the corridor. Marie wanted to see this end already.

“Okay, ninth one, we’re about to be finished.”

“No-no. We still have to visit the Halls of Development and the Halls of Fame.”

“You get the point, what’s the next hall?”

Heather approached the nearby display. This time, there were two paintings: one had a stop sign and the other a beer bottle. Marie followed.

“This is for the **Hall of Nihilism**. After doing everything, knowing everything, and still finding no changes, you can feel like giving up. After all that disappointment, hate…

Maybe you’ll just go with the flow and not care anymore. You stop doing anything for others and yourself since we’ll all die anyways, since life is meaningless.

Nihilism can be good since it forces you to confront the reality of our universe... and still live despite that. It frees you in a sense, from excessive control and worrying.

But this is a Hall of Infamy, so it focuses on the bad side. Thinking in absolutes, pseudointellectualism, superiority complex, apathy, social alienation, locking the world with unrealistic ideals... it's a mix of some previous halls."

Marie thought for a while.

"So... you gonna explain why there are two paintings?"

"Ah yes. For better logistical performance, instead of two separate halls, we just divided one hall into two major sectors: Philosophical Nihilism and Apathetic Nihilism. We call them Nihil-1 and Nihil-2 in the documents."

A pause.

"So which one's which?"

"...That was an issue when this was first implemented. Handlers were so confused which one was Apathy and Nihilism that occupants were erroneously misplaced to a different sector. And these misplaced souls had to wait months until they received the correct punishment.

Little hiccup there, but failures are part of development. And now we're here, eons later, with more organized paperwork and more satisfied handlers."

"You aren't satisfied."

"...Let's just talk about this hall, shall we?"

"No."

Heather was surprised.

"Why not?"

"You'll just show me the hall and I'll be terrified. Again."

"Don't worry. The punishment here is relatively tame compared to the other halls."

"Yeah, right..."

"Trust me."

They just looked at each other for a moment, before one resumed the discussion.

“Fine.”

Heather now had a half-smile. Marie contemplated.

“Is Camus here?”

“Ironically, no. He used nihilism for proper discourse, not hopelessness. Similar thinkers are also not here.

What we DO have are Internet pseudointellectuals. And those kinds of Rick and Morty fans. At least in Nihil-1.”

Heather used the tablet. A giant TV can be found every mile or two, and each showed a motivational speaker. Ceramic floor and no sky. Screams of agony.

“They will forever be tormented by positivity videos and inspirational stories.”

Marie snickered.

“These people are worse than Hitler?”

“...That might sound absurd because these occupants are previous commoners. But imagine if they had complete control over our society.

I reckon these kinds of nihilists would do worse since they don't care about life anymore. Not only hard to argue but potentially harmful.

You wouldn't want to hand them nukes, would you?"

"I... don't have nukes...?"

"Exactly."

Marie was thinking again.

"You're right, this is tame. Might even be helpful.

But of course I wouldn't want to be stuck here forever."

Heather smiled.

"Want to see Nihil-2?"

"Yeah."

So they did. Nihil-2 had couches, CRTs, VCRs, and junk food. But some occupants were shot by projectiles from security cameras attached to the metal-alloy ceiling. Heather began explaining that.

“Don’t worry, those aren’t lethal. The bullets keep the souls in pain which forces them to clean the hall, every time an area exceeds a dirt gauge.

At least these couch philosophers and cynics won’t be apathetic anymore. Serving systems they loathe.”

“Yeah, and it’s also tame.”

“They’re the reason the hall cleans itself. Saves logistics for having two sectors here.”

The handler tried to keep the expression, but somehow it became cold. Marie took note of it.

“Something wrong?”

“...Sorry, that usually doesn’t happen. Let’s get out first.”

The tablet was used, and the final Hall of Infamy was waiting for them. It was barely a difference, but Heather moved slower this time.

The next hall had a Corinthian pillar.

There was no painting.

"Where is it? Why is it missing?"

Heather was silent.

"Hey, there's no painting. Hey, the pain–"

"This is the tenth hall. The Hall of Anti-Life."

Marie noticed the tone.

"It's not just the loss of hope in others and yourself. It's hatred. The most potent kind. Hatred for nature, people, the universe. Everything, everyone, and existence itself.

Knowledge is power, they say. THIS is the result of too much knowledge: the complete rejection of life.

In a way, this is the driving force of all the other halls.

Many misanthropes and efilists reside here, along with human extinction advocates and nuclear extremists."

Marie couldn't respond.

"Their punishment? To live.

That's right. Their punishment is to simply live, because their hatred for life is enough to cause them anguish.

Knowing they will live for all eternity, knowing there will be no escape, knowing people will keep existing...

To face the one thing they hate the most.

Other halls can target specific human limitations, but when life itself is rejected, we had no other way."

Heather observed Marie as well.

"I don't want someone like you poisoned by them.

They'll make misanthropy look reasonable, make it look like clarity, when it's just another defense mechanism. But it's still complex, and somehow, misanthropy adds something good to the discussion.

Misanthropy doesn't always mean you hate everyone. You can still uphold morals and respect the good people. And everyone dislikes society in some form anyways; it's just misanthropes who care so much, who wish people actually looked at themselves and actually improve."

Heather didn't like saying those words for neutrality.

“But we’re not talking about those misanthropes.

If you call everything terrible, then no one can engage in your argument. It’s safe and it doesn’t provide anything useful like a solution or a suggestion.

They create ‘truths’ to sedate themselves, to have easy ‘answers’ for their frustrations, to extend their identity. To deflect the complexities of life they’re too afraid to face. Intellectual laziness masquerading as insight.

Many people do the same, but they have the darkest perspectives out there.”

A short pause.

“It’s exhausting, both for us and them. I can’t fathom how they can say their beliefs help them. It’s just unhealthy. Knowing and pointing out the ‘truth’ doesn’t always make someone better. Sometimes, it just proves they’re worse.

The universe may have neglected and misunderstood them for too long. But the universe affected everyone, and not everyone ended up like them.

It’s their choice to be miserable, to know the ‘truth’, but we have our own choice.”

Heather stared at the tablet with those eyes. After a while, Marie had thought of a careful reply.

“Hey... are you, fine? This seems personal to you.”

“No, it’s just, something. You don’t have to worry much.”

“It’s okay if you don’t want to show the hall.”

Heather looked at her again.

“...Really?”

“If it helps you sleep at night.”

The handler chuckled a bit, with some pauses.

“Souls don’t sleep, but I get you. A few protocol breaches aren’t that bad...”

And both started to soften up again.

“Al...right! This is the end of Part 1 for our tour!”

“Part 1?!”

"I already reminded you. But don't worry, Parts 2 and 3 are much shorter, and I've done this so many times to be sure of it. Trust."

"...Okay."

"After all that, are you thrilled to be processed?"

She was not prepared for Heather's enthusiasm. Again.

"I think I'm more scarred for life than thrilled."

"I know. I'm just mentioning a very old response from the handbook. What were our ancestors thinking..."

"What's the new response?"

"Now that you're traumatized, does processing sound more enticing to you?"

Marie took a while to "process" this.

"At least it's honest."

"Well then. Next stop: the Halls of Development."

THE HALLS OF DEVELOPMENT

chapter 3

The two left the corridor and returned to the reception area. Heather assisted.

“You can rest first after all that mind screw earlier.”

“I’m not really tired, I can manage.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, the bad stuff is over, and I’m curious to see this next realm.”

Heather glanced away for a second, then back at her.

“If you insist.”

A few configurations with the tablet were made. The walls of the room started to fade towards the floor. The sofa disappeared and Marie fell off.

What used to be a bright room had been reduced to nothing, and they could see a dark purple sky with dim “stars”, including nearby planets as well. The taupe ground was lit up by tall, white crystal formations—some even going higher than an Earth skyscraper. There were glowing lichens, large stalks with even larger foliage, and other occupants walking in the distance.

Marie had something to say.

“I thought the mind screw was over.”

Later, they began exploring the area. Marie spotted a few orange foxes with white and black patches, along with a luminescent star shape in each of their foreheads. These foxes hopped and dashed arbitrarily, while there were fluttering dots of light above them.

“What are those?”

“We call them 'star foxes', they're natural here along with these glow fireflies.”

“You guys just have impeccable creativity with naming your things.”

Marie saw a bunch of clay statues as well.

“Those?”

“Just a quirk I added to my purgatory. The platypus is an interesting creature.”

“And how about that thing?”

A wooden sign had the message “Suicidals accepted!” with an asterisk mentioning “unless you’re like that dictator with a funny moustache, or a suicide bomber”.

“The afterlife designed this?”

“Nope. I customized the sign, and the committee allowed it. Maybe they thought it’s more relatable and welcoming to newer generations of souls… somehow.”

Marie studied the sky again.

“Those stars seem too dark.”

“It’s because those are the other purgatories, just like this one. Each with their own Four Halls of Development, for the four-step program we handlers implement. The Halls of Development could refer to the realm or the specific halls of one purgatory.”

“Just four steps? Seems easy enough. Much easier than drug rehab.”

“I spent 905 years getting through these halls.”

“…Really?”

“Yep. I enjoyed all those centuries of getting processed.”

Just then, a man walking nearby approached Heather.

“Crikey, it’s Heather! Been a while, eh?”

“Yeah, how’s Hall 2 going?”

“One supervisor said I’m almost outta there, which is bloody great.”

“Very nice.”

Heather returned her focus to Marie.

“Oh yeah. Marie, this is Richard T. Chapman, he's been here for about 10 years now.”

Marie was a bit surprised to hear that, but it’s still no match to Heather’s tenure. Richard smiled at Marie.

“Oi mate, what brings you 'ere?”

“Uhh, I'm not really sure yet...”

“I was from Straya once. Was about to get some Hungry Jack’s until a wildfire took out my ‘atchback. I got out then some 'roo just kicked me back on the road and I got run over by a McLaren or something. It's pro’lly that Bri'ish bloke 'round the hood, we hate 'im.”

“Oh...”

“We Ozzies are used to it. And this stuff is on daily news every 4 hours. Guess those spiders made us stronger.

Besides, the bigger deal are the gov'nos and the housing markets. Can't believe they're running our lovely country down the ground.”

Heather had to remind him by showing her tablet.

“Oh right, you madams are busy. Til next time.”

Richard started jogging away from the place, leaving the two alone again. Marie broke the silence.

“Neat encounter.”

Heather checked the tablet and realized something.

“Damn it, I forgot to update the Light Vision app, forgot there was a serious patch yesterday. I’ll have to go back to my office with the WiFi there.”

“Hey, what about me?”

She turned to see Marie, before giving instructions.

“See the *apex* of those *twin* rhubarbs?”

“What?”

“My bad, literary hiccup. Anyways, once you get past those two leafy things, you’ll see some kind of arch. It’s the entrance to the first hall. I’ll catch up later.”

Heather ran towards the original spot of the office and Marie, from a sizable distance, saw that it was being reconstructed. She groaned.

“Why didn’t they just light this up in the first place?

Two leafy things…”

Marie tried to piece it together. She saw a part of an arch above the rhubarbs earlier and slowly moved towards the other side.

There it was. A concrete arch with a symbol of a small "i", along with indigo bushes, a few spotlights, and a cuboidal monolith on the left side.

Marie interacted with the monolith, which projected a database of people who recently passed the trials of this hall. What trials? Marie doesn't know yet. That's where her handler comes in.

Literally. She was behind Marie.

"Sorry to keep yo–"

"Ah!"

Heather didn't expect Marie to fall on the ground again. She slowly stood up afterwards.

"Jesus, don't scare me like that.

And why don't you light this place up? I like dark mode but not when I can't see anything."

"That's why I updated Light Vision earlier, to tailor this experience for you."

Heather played with the tablet and Marie could now see the brightness being adjusted higher, as if they were inside a photo editing software.

“Want more contrast? Lower sharpness? Modify tint?”

“Wait, does it change for everyone else or is it just me?”

“Just your perception. Completely personalized. Light Vision’s nifty, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, can we start already?”

“Sure.”

Heather shut off the monolith first before explaining.

“This place is the Halls of Development. Where you end up if you haven’t sinned too much but also haven’t done many heroic things, so pretty much most of humanity.

I was once an unprocessed soul like you and I had to go through these four halls, to get clearance for the Halls of Fame, the most glorious place in the afterlife.

Except I only spent 3 years there, since I wanted to serve unprocessed souls. I could either become a handler or a

supervisor for a purgatory. Did a 10-year-long training first though.

The two positions have the same value with different functions. Handlers manage a purgatory and introduce new souls, while supervisors guide souls in something we call the 'processing stage'.

It involves meditating with your deepest flaws, making peace with them, building something better, et cetera. Like an overly long self-help seminar. Harder, better, faster, stronger, all that stuff.

Occupants in the Halls of Fame just chill and keep the place in good shape. If you want to be a slacker after centuries of pain, that's on you. As long as you clean up."

"Processed souls must be so boring to talk to."

"And yet you're having a conversation with me."

"...Good point."

Heather cleared her throat.

"After realizing how difficult it was to get processed in the purgatory, I decided to become one of the volunteer

handlers, instead of solely being an occupant in the afterlife. Committing to public service instead."

"So a handler's like an afterlife retail worker?"

"...You can probably see why I'm starting to regret my volunteering decision.

But the service is for them, not me... even if I rarely get the desire to punch a face."

Marie lifted an eyebrow at her, making Heather realize and backtrack.

"Not you though."

The handler sighed.

"My soul is still fragile, I guess. Other processed souls can gracefully perform their work. I still haven't let go of some of my weaknesses, but they accepted me anyways. Maybe it's because I spent too much time in here...

Sorry, let's just continue."

Heather pointed at the hall for a second.

"The first hall is the **Hall of Information**. It's not only about dissecting information you get but knowing how it can be used for your thought processing and actions.

Many people think they know a lot and they usually get validated by the world around them. But when someone disturbs that illusion, they get defensive. They label. They make quick assumptions. They compare identities. They hide behind jokes. They rely on personal attacks, not actual responses. They can ignore the 'other' completely.

We get this defensiveness because we don't want our life reduced to just a few words. We have a desire to be understood, not brushed off, so we might get personal when we feel like our life is being 'critiqued'.

What we miss is our confirmation bias, our desire to always see the 'right' but not the 'wrong'. This is not ignorance, but a poisoned well of misinformation that can be mistaken for 'knowledge'. We're all susceptible to this, and even our 'awareness' can be corrupted.

Unfortunately, that poison will go deeper and deeper if we don't acknowledge it. If we don't stop before it gets worse. Before it hurts. Before it affects you. Others.

Before all those highs come crashing down."

Marie thought she was getting too personal.

"Knowledge remains as the foundation for how we perceive ourselves, others, and our surroundings. Thus, it is the foundation for how we behave and handle human limitations — things we discussed in the Halls of Infamy. Information serves as the starting point for knowledge, which we don't want to poison.

The task for the occupants here is to read a personalized library 700 times in a row without submitting to personal emotions, so they'll learn how to absorb information more effectively and be open to other views.

Not everyone gets out quick. It took me about a human lifetime to finish this task, and some even took longer. That's how brutal this can get."

Seven hundred times. In a row.

"Woah.

And I thought browsing social media was hard enough.

Speaking of that, I wonder if social media is good for freedom of speech or if social media proves that human nature is awful, if you give it no limitations."

"...We can enter this place to see how it feels like."

"Okay. I'm curious."

They walked past the arch. Many desks could be found, with some occupants reactivating bookshelves back into existence once they were done with a book. One of them was old and had her eyes locked on a page. She sighed heavily, which the supervisor tried to comfort. Heather approached this person, and Marie was a few feet away.

"How's it going, Evelyn?"

"It's hard. I never got to read much books in my life. It's all those Brits screwing up South Africa. It's just them."

"It's true they were the root cause but look at Mandela. Despite the system in his time, he still used knowledge to open his eyes. He didn't back down, no matter how much he got persecuted. He fought against apartheid and still serves as your city's icon in the 22nd century.

Systemic issues might appear harder to you nowadays. But look again: Nelson was one of the few great minds before. Many people have accessible knowledge now. With all that potential intellect, there will be more than just a few great minds.

Besides, the Brits are different in our time and also face their own problems. It's important to separate people from the past and the people now, even if they benefited from their ancestors' actions they didn't do. Just don't let that separation devolve into revisionism and denial.

You can do this. It took me a little over 58 years to get past this task. That might sound bad, but it just shows that you're not alone with your struggles."

Evelyn felt better.

"Thanks. I'm grateful to have you as my handler."

"You're welcome."

Marie had seen the entire thing, rethinking about her perception of Heather for a while.

"Hey Marie, this is Evelyn H. King. She's our newest Hall of Information occupant."

Evelyn looked at Marie.

"Hey there."

"Oh, uh, hi. I'm still learning about the afterlife. Hope you're doing okay."

"It's good. I prefer this over the noise and mess I usually find in my city."

"I guess, me too."

Heather entered the conversation.

"So, we'll be leaving you for now, Evelyn."

"Sure. I'll check on Marie when she finally starts here."

Marie did a mock salute.

"Looking forward to it."

Evelyn had lightened up her expression.

"Bye Evelyn."

The three waved at each other. Heather and Marie were back on track... until Heather saw a Japanese walking out of the hall. Possibly in her 50s before she died.

“Haru! Congratulations on completing the task!”

“Thanks. I was surprised at how easy it was.”

“Damn. You don’t have to flex like that.”

Marie wanted to do a little trolling.

“Surprising, kinda like Pearl Harbor?”

“Nope, kinda like Hiroshima.”

That’s when Marie remembered, Haru was Asian.

“Toodles!”

Haru left the hall happily. A Russian man joined in...

“For me, it’s kinda like Nixon leaving the office.”

...and walked away, just like that.

The two women were finally back on track. They got out of the hall and Heather prepared her tablet again.

“Next hall?”

"Next hall."

They vanished... then reappeared on another side of the planet. The arch was there, this time with a speech bubble instead of a lowercase "i" and surrounded by four benches. There were small spotlights, and of course, a monolith on the left.

"Here we are, the second Hall of Development: The **Hall of Social Awareness**."

"Something you might be lacking."

Heather was caught off guard. She thought the snarking was over... or maybe that was just Marie's personality, something she uses to cope with things.

"Rude. I already got through this place."

"Might be time for a checkup?"

"There is no..."

The handler could only sigh and feel exasperated.

"As you might have guessed, you know-it-all, this trains people on how to channel their knowledge for better

social awareness. It doesn't just mean knowing cues or knowing what makes good behavior. It's more than that.

Real social awareness means attempting to understand the 'other', even if they have behavior you might consider different. It's about looking past the surface and knowing what could be driving them: their parents, environments, mistakes, developments, all those things.

This is where real change happens. Not when we shove our opinions and take a shot at others as if we're better. It's when we realize we're all human beings with similar potential, if it weren't for our different backgrounds.

It's when we realize there might be parts of us in them. And you don't throw away those parts of yourself, you understand them and you try to improve. It's when you realize, maybe this 'other' isn't really an 'other'.

It's hard to do, especially with society and human nature. But maybe we should give this more thought. If more of us try to look at others this way, especially those with great power, maybe the world would be a better place."

Marie could only listen and feel moved.

"Wow... how do you make these TED talks so quick?"

"Well, I've been saying these words for 400 years every day, so that's how. It's not memorization, it's ingraining the words in your mind and living with them."

"One question, how long did it take you to get into the next hall?"

"It took-wait a minute, I haven't explained the task yet.

The task of this hall is about uncovering and treating the trauma of a cloned child that doesn't age. The trauma depends on the occupant, but they're all buried under the erratic and bitter personality of that child.

Occupants of this hall take an average of 31.57 years to complete this task. Somehow, someone set a record of only doing it under a year."

"Speedrunners, man... so how long did you take?"

Heather seethed a bit and exhaled.

"A hundred and twenty-seven. I suck at this game."

There she was again. Feeling down, staring at the tablet. Suddenly, they were teleported to the next arch, which

had a symbol of a magnifying glass, one mirror on the right, spotlights, and the monolith on the left.

Marie was confused.

"Is this fine? Not visiting the Hall of Social Awareness?"

"I... guess. The regulations aren't that strict about hall demonstrations, considering we only use a few seconds for the Halls of Infamy.

Besides, you wouldn't want to look at those people and the cloned children. I wouldn't want to waste your time or make you feel disturbed again."

Heather glanced at her tablet, before checking Marie.

"This is the Hall of Introspection, the third one. It trains people to use their knowledge in determining their own flaws, then using knowledge to work with these things.

This allows them to be more aware of how they position themselves around others, rather than unconsciously submitting to narcissism, envy, or hatred.

To look at the possibility that they aren't above anyone, and maybe they're even worse.

Souls are trained through isolation with multiple glass mirrors, while unseen supervisors monitor progress and prevent introspection from turning into self-hatred. The task is to simply exist, as the mirrors can see your most honest self. It's like a chamber of reflection.

By this point, the souls can already cope through years of isolation, with little side effects."

Marie was expecting to see this hall and the fourth one next. Instead, there was an unusual silence.

Heather only watched her tablet for half a minute, then Marie. It seemed like she hesitated for a bit, with some stuttering, until she spoke up.

"You know, this hall was the hardest one for me when I was still being processed."

Heather clutched her left sleeve and looked downwards.

"I hated myself. A lot.

I always wanted to help and show care for others. Maybe I cared too much. While they make mistakes and remain indifferent, I felt like I just affected people and I always had to shoulder the blame when I do something wrong.

I looked like an idiot who doesn't think whenever I made a mistake. My whole life reduced to some word.

After a while, I started to think they just waited for my next screw up that further validated their opinions. Like I was the only one making an effort to look at myself and understand others.

Soon, I got fed up with seeing too many people who can't think. This bled into my social life. I pushed people away, saw them as 'shallow', 'blind', and 'hypocritical', started hating them for a while... it just worsened the issue. I tried to forget the pain by taking a hit of a newer pain.

All those rejections and regrets... no one knew all those thoughts. They would just see the surface, and I couldn't do anything. Even helping others felt pathetic, just done for my ego and to prove I'm finally good for once.

This was anti-life controlling me."

Heather's right hand started holding the other elbow, the tablet now dangling from the lowered left hand. Couldn't look straight at Marie anymore.

She didn't know this side of Heather. Marie couldn't talk, despite wanting to. This was someone venting, and she didn't want to worsen it. She had to listen first.

Heather then gazed towards the dim sky.

“But once I got here, I didn’t have other people to think about. All I had was myself. Alone with my thoughts. This hall made me face my innermost demons.

The worst part? I realized this wasn’t even the final Hall of Development. I spent a good 638 years in this hall. They probably felt so much pity that they let me out.

I felt like I needed to be locked away. I didn’t even want to be here in the first place. I’ll always find something wrong with me soon enough. I didn’t need to exist.

Sometimes I blame my upbringing, and I can get really bitter about it... but maybe it’s just me. Always keeping myself stuck in these self-destructive loops.”

Heather tried to eye Marie again.

“That number keeps echoing in my mind. Six hundred and thirty-eight years in there.”

Marie could only open her mouth faintly, with sorrow from that realization.

“All because I hated myself.”

She only met Heather an hour ago. Saying something about this would feel insincere but not saying anything felt worse. Especially with all the words earlier.

"Maybe my volunteer work's just another projection of that selfish desire. If they knew my awful side, maybe people would dismiss me as 'hollow'."

Heather analyzed Marie and released a strong sigh.

"Sorry about that. I should've been more professional. I shouldn't spread negativity to other people. They already feel bad on their own. And I'm supposed to be processed.

But you just seemed different... what am I saying...

Let's just go to the next hall."

Heather took a while to proceed, and they teleported near the arched entrance of a new hall. Symbol was a brain, there was that monolith, lights, glowing shrubs...

"This is the **Hall of Thought Management**, the last of these halls. It's about..."

It was subtle, but her voice became duller, weaker, and heavier. Dragged a bit more than usual.

"...might sound like the hall is only about thoughts. But its main goal is to manage emotions and human nature, to perform concrete actions for the good of–"

"I'm sorry."

Heather halted her walk and turned around, still having that weak expression.

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

Her eyes couldn't focus on Marie.

"I should be the one apologizing."

"Forget that. You kept apologizing throughout your life and nobody listened anyways."

Heather went silent.

"People experience pain and misunderstanding all the time. But they had other people in their lives. Others who help them and show up when they fall.

Sure, not everyone would follow. They'd keep dismissing, they'd keep ignoring the whole story, they'd keep making quick judgments like the average person.

But maybe the special ones, those who can understand, hopefully they would be enough to soothe that pain.

People aren't always bad and they can even be warm in the right conditions, as you said back in the Halls of Infamy. They're just facing their own lives, too.

Everyone overthinks by the way, they just don't say it out loud. Everyone's been burned by society, by other people, by themselves, by this universe."

Her eyes darted to the ground, then back at Heather.

"You can look at literal hell for centuries, maybe you can overcome your own hell, too.

Sorry about earlier. I forgot people have their stories."

The two stood still. It felt like a couple of minutes, until a mouth slowly tilted upward.

"I wish I met more people like you on Earth."

Heather wanted a request.

“Hey, uh, can we skip this and go straight to the Halls of Fame? I really don’t want to stay here. You know...”

“Absolutely.”

Marie said with such clarity, and Heather was uplifted.

“Thanks.

Oh yeah, it took me 81 years to finish this hall. Task was about teamwork. We had to create some metaphysical house then manage it for some time.

Let’s just go back to the office.”

Heather used the tablet, and after a few seconds...

A flash of white.

THE HALLS OF FAME

chapter 4

“Hold on, let me reconstruct it for you.”

Buttons were being activated, until the office faded into existence again. Heather opened the back door and let Marie in, before doing the same and closing the door.

“Whew, I said a lot back there, huh?”

“It’s fine. Some of my friends did similar things with me when I was still alive.”

“Thanks, again.”

“No problem.”

The handler checked her tablet.

“Okay, what’s next is the final part of the tour. The Halls of Fame. Since we’re just visiting the place, we need to contact someone from the committee.”

“Then I just wait here.”

“Correct.”

Marie sat on the sofa, making sure it actually existed this time. Soon, Heather started a transmission. The tablet buzzed for a few seconds, until the other side talked.

“Hello, how may I help you?”

“It’s me, Heather. A handler from H_Dev. Serial Identifier H-19283746.”

A pause... then a reply.

“Okay, what’s your request?”

“The usual. I’m performing introductory procedures for an unprocessed soul with the name 'Marie L. Sebastian', Serial Identifier d-59452380_mls. We’re on schedule, as you can see there.”

Long silence. Marie had her right fist against her face while Heather tapped her foot softly.

The tablet buzzed once.

“Access granted.”

Another flash of white. They had been teleported. And Marie saw it, in all its glory.

The entrance to the Halls of Fame. There was a giant golden arch, the fence gate designed with triple spikes. It was encircled by shiny cumulus clouds bathing in rays of light, as if they were on a cloud layer. Other people teleported in and out of the place, and some waited at the entrance to receive documents.

Heather accompanied Marie to the entrance booth, and the handler there spoke to them.

“Heather, we’ve received your message, is this Marie?”

“Yes, she’s about to finish the introductory procedures. After our visit here, we’ll start the processing stage.”

“She looks young, must have died a bit too early. But age doesn’t really deteriorate the soul, we’ve got so many seniors jogging around here just fine.”

A couple of items were made ready for the recipient.

“Let’s prepare you for the visit, Marie.”

Marie paid attention to the other handler.

“Here's your passport.”

“Okay.”

“Here's your guest ID. Press that button to teleport to your handler in case you get lost.”

“Okay.”

“Here's your floating stamp. It’s automatically removed after your visit.”

“Okay.”

This handler smiled at her.

“Enjoy your stay.”

Heather also prepared herself. As they started to leave, Heather said...

“Thank you, ma’am.”

And off they went. Through the entrance and inside the Halls of Fame, there was a beautiful marble fountain in the center. A large pond had doves resting momentarily along the lily pads. Numerous people stepped on the brick roads, and green spaces featured small trees and flowering bushes. Some drones also cleaned the place.

"So... do they have coffee like you promised?"

"Uh, yeah. In fact, there's a coffee station just for people like you. If I remember correctly.

Let me just..."

Heather tinkered with the locator app from her tablet before she teleported both of them to "A Monk's Gas: Frappes, Teas, and More!" Of course, Marie wasn't the only one who wanted a diabetic cup of joe.

There was a short queue, some sat on the tables with their beverages, some were inside, some were having their dream barbeques with the grills outside, some just relaxed on the spare benches...

"Yes! They do have frappes!"

There was a big sign that said, "UNprocessed souls get UNlimited frappe refills within the first hour of visit!"

"Holy!"

"Yes, this place is holy."

A few minutes of waiting in line later, Marie proudly held her frappe while walking, with Heather feeling cautious for some reason.

“Too bad they only serve vanilla flavor for unprocessed souls. Didn’t see the asterisk...

But a frappe’s still a frappe. And it tastes nice.”

“Your drink will go to waste if we don’t stay indoors.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“Doves.”

Marie raised a brow, waiting for Heather’s explanation.

“Some doves migrated to *some cities* here, coming from a black and white town somewhere...”

She was puzzled by the handler’s erratic behavior.

“There you go again, saying these cryptic things.”

“Sorry... maybe I’m getting possessed by someone else to make me say those things? Some kind of troll?”

"You're a soul. You can't get possessed."

"But seriously, there are doves here and we should stay inside if you want that frappe."

"So what? Doves are a typical thing in heaven."

"They'll steal stuff like frappes from unprocessed souls. They think it's a sin to eat and drink while walking."

"That's crazy talk."

One of the birds dived towards Marie and stole her drink, carrying the cup with its claws.

"Hey, what the hell?!"

"Told you."

Heather received an annoyed glance from Marie.

"Let's just settle in one place if you want to drink that coffee knockoff."

"Forget it, let's deal with these halls first so I can start getting processed already."

“Yeah, let’s teleport ourselves to the first hall.”

Heather searched using her tablet and immediately sent them to that place. They were in front of what seemed to be a hall center. There was a quartzite statue of a book then a granite circle around it, which had water and a dozen pads. A few handlers and recipients were also there. Marie was still curious about the dove thing.

“Can I ask about those doves again? How the hell do they know morals here?”

“Animals on Earth don’t have souls so they don’t end up in the afterlife, but these doves have been given a mini version of a human soul.

Certain afterlife creatures, like the doves and the Hall of Delusion spiders, have a built-in system called ‘NFS’ designed by the Beyond for environmental monitoring.”

“Just like pigeon spies on Earth. And what's NFS?”

“Nemesis Factor Severity. It has many indicators, from Burnout to Most Wanted. The Psygnosis mode is only reserved for the most extreme cases.”

“Okay, I think you should just shut the hell up.”

Heather was confused as Marie briskly walked away. The handler shrugged and just followed Marie.

“I think you shouldn't be saying 'hell' a bit too much in here. I just mentioned facts that the committee knows about the Beyond.”

“What's next, you’ll say people in the Halls of Infamy are 'left for dead', and people here have been 'called to duty' for the handler gig to 'counter the strike' of evil?”

“...I'm not that insane, but it is sorta like that.

Our topics are getting irrelevant again. Let’s just start.”

Both gazed at the statue, and Heather finally explained what the hell this place was.

“This is the Six Halls of Fame, what you humans like to call heaven. It is sorta like that, but because humans forget that things can never be perfect, they’d likely be disappointed when they see this place.

All six halls represent humanity’s greatest values, each lacking something from another but powerful when all values are combined. This place is occupied by the most revered people in Earth history, and, of course, the souls who completed the Halls of Development.

There isn't really much to say about this place other than it being a gigantic community park, with facilities and stations maintained by its souls. Occupants enjoy the view, consume soul drinks and foodstuffs for pleasure, contribute to the collective mind of the halls, and then clean up their own mess.

On the other hand, you can also be a more annoying know-it-all by learning the courses in this place, but I don't think you're interested."

Marie rolled her eyes, though Heather didn't bother and continued anyways.

"The first hall, this one, is the **Hall of Knowledge**. Proper knowledge isn't just about the pursuit of raw information. It's acknowledging that absolute truth is not achievable because of our flaws, yet pursuing knowledge anyways.

If we already found the truth, one may ask: why are we still here? Why does society still need to develop, despite centuries of other developments?

The answer? Because development never stops. There are so many things to learn that even the afterlife won't be enough to capture the whole truth.

If we accept this, maybe we wouldn't be too entitled with our 'truths'. We'll know that our 'truths' aren't the entire truth, they're subject to our own flawed perception, and everyone's only claiming a part of it.

Truth is one fixed destination, but learning isn't like that. Learning is something more dynamic, something more beautiful, something... more human."

Marie didn't reply. A smile was more than enough.

"This hall houses some of the most influential thinkers in human history, along with occupants visiting the place or following these thinkers. They're just near the center, look at that hut over there."

Heather pointed towards an unusually large, open hut with numerous tables, bookshelves, hanging lamps, and people having discussions inside.

"Wanna check it out? You can even have conversations with them... just don't eat up all their time since they're busy with other occupants."

"Yeah, I guess."

They began walking. As they inched closer, the words of the great thinkers became clearer. There was a handler for the entrance.

“Good day, planning to meet our greatest thinkers?”

Heather showed her tablet and Marie’s stamp.

“Yes, we just want a short visit.”

The other handler glanced at Marie.

“Alright, guest ID please. Just step forward for the scan.”

Marie came nearer. Sensors on the ceiling automatically registered the input.

“Thank you for your cooperation, you may now enter.”

Heather proceeded while Marie was busy looking at the hall’s occupants. Two people were playing checkers, one played chess by himself, and another two were having a good time with tea until they were bothered by someone else standing nearby.

“Is that… Carl Sagan?”

"Yes, he's interrupting Socrates and Confucius again."

Marie got nearer and eavesdropped... despite being only a few feet away. Carl Sagan was speaking...

"...the afterlife exists. So who created it? Is the Beyond just a metaphysical force but not a god, not even a being?

How can it even design all these things with no sentient mind? Have you ever thought more deeply about that?"

Socrates didn't even look.

"Why don't you ask that yourself?"

"...You, already said that to me like, 30 times."

"Well that just means I'm busy having tea here with my pal. Now scram."

And Sagan stopped disturbing their peace. Socrates was pleased... and remembered what he was doing currently.

"I must say, this is a damn fine cup of tea."

Confucius nodded to him.

"I agree."

"Any words today, fellow philosopher? Why did you come here again?"

"It is because of The Way. The Way will give way to all your ways, for a better way of life."

"Well said, brother."

Marie was not following at all... and could only mutter.

"I am confuciused."

Heather observed the environment again and spotted another great thinker.

"Oh look, there's Albert Camus."

Marie turned to see Camus, then talked to him.

"Hello Camus. I've read some of your works before I got sent here."

"Sup... I guess there WAS an afterlife. Just not for all our religions back on Earth."

Camus leaned, covered a side of his face, and whispered something to Marie.

“At least I got to prove Nietzsche wrong.”

“I said God was dead, which is TECHNICALLY true here. And it’s not even about literal death, it’s about the death of values in modern society!”

Camus could only chuckle at Nietzsche, who somehow heard those words. The rest of the thinkers were already used to this routine, so they didn’t bother.

“Still, never dead when he wasn’t alive in the first place.”

“You’re twisting my words!”

“Cope.”

Nietzsche inhaled for a few seconds... and walked away. Marie finally saw a woman entering the hut, and she wanted to ask.

“Who are you?”

“The reason you have rights.”

"I'm guessing you're some feminist...?"

"Not just some feminist, THE feminist. I helped start the second-wave movement. 'The Second Sex', ring a bell?"

Marie couldn't reply honestly, except for one thing...

"No bells rung."

"Simone. Simone de Beauvoir. You should start reading feminist history in this place."

"Sorry, I'm still unprocessed, can't stay here for long."

"Oh. You have that stamp, I see it now.

Okay, when you get clearance, try visiting Grand Library 4. The feminist section."

Marie nodded in response. Just then, Camus was on his way out of the hut. Marie realized these two people had similar accents, and she said something that caught the attention of these intellectuals.

"Both of you are French, right?"

Beauvoir focused on Marie, and Camus stopped. They responded alternately.

“Yes.”

“Uh-huh.”

Marie asked her next question.

“Why use English?”

Beauvoir replied.

“It’s universal and it helps everyone connect with each other. Not in a colonial way, but in an empathetic way, now that we’ve reclaimed more of it. And you won’t even understand my musings if I used my mother tongue.”

“Oh. Obviously.

Alright, thanks for your insights, Camus, Simone.”

Camus nodded and left, while Beauvoir had a half-smile and resumed her journey to the furthest table.

Marie felt like she was forgetting something...

“Hey Marie.”

She had a little heart attack there, now seeing Heather.

“Jesus. Can you NOT sneak up behind me?”

“Can you also NOT forget about me when you talk to these people?”

“...Sorry, I kinda overreacted. Again.

Can we visit the second hall now?”

“Sure. Let’s leave this hut first.”

When they were outside, Heather looked at the tablet and tapped on it a few times. Some configurations later, the two got sent into the next hall. The statue this time was referencing a heart, and everything else was pretty much the same.

“The second hall is this. The Hall of Self-Love. Self-love isn’t arrogance, selfishness, or a lack of consideration for others. It’s the opposite.

It’s knowing how to respect yourself and your limitations. It’s knowing how to take breaks from society for your

own needs, not just the needs of your peers. It's knowing how to maintain your health so it won't spill or affect how you deal with others.

Without self-love, you can't love others effectively. You cannot commit to actual help, only the hollow kind. That is not help, that is performance."

"And you learned all that from experience."

It took a few seconds until Heather started glaring a bit at Marie. Her fists were trembling to a noticeable extent, before sighing heavily. That scared Marie.

"Can you just... can we please get away from that thing I have. Please."

"...I just like poking you. Chill."

Marie literally poked Heather's left arm.

"Poke."

Heather formed a faint smile.

“Alright. I should have listened to my words instead of reacting like that, and we both know each other now. I’ll still allow your typical banter, just don’t go too far.”

“Okay, I won’t go as far as 900 years.”

Heather stared at Marie then crossed her arms.

“Really.”

She reviewed the tablet, appearing vaguely annoyed.

“Great, I can’t remember some of my monologues now. It would have sounded nice...

I’ll just work with what’s in my mind. Okay. Self-love... lacks societal use, but don’t let that fool you. The people here are very nice, actually self-aware, and they’re the warmest individuals you can meet in the afterlife. That seems like good use of cognition.”

Heather observed the hut, looking more serious now.

“I like visiting this place. Maybe I should have spent more time developing myself here before volunteer work.

Or maybe I needed insights from someone else different. Someone who can understand me, someone who's also cynical like my past self."

Marie noticed.

"That's a weird compliment."

"Yeah... let's just visit the hut in this hall."

Soon, they stepped inside after another guest ID check. This time, Marie was the first to initiate a conversation with a familiar face.

"Mr. Rogers?"

"Hello there, neighbor. What brings you here?"

"I haven't watched your TV show that much, but I've heard many great things. How's the afterlife going for you?"

Rogers had to think for a second, fingers on his chin.

"Honestly? It was slightly displeasing to see no god or any deity here. I'm also not into the idea of labelling our heroes because it creates a pedestal or a box, when we're all the same human beings.

But what's important is that we found paradise, flawed as it may be. Similar to finding ourselves."

Marie softened her expression.

"You're one of the few religious people who didn't do 'that' with the kids."

The old man took a while to get her point.

"It's such a sad reality that people misuse religion for personal gain. Some might say religion has bad roots, but it shouldn't stay that way. We should empower and educate, not control and destroy each other."

Marie just couldn't feel negative with this man.

"I'm not religious myself, but I commend you for being a role model to our society. I don't usually trust people from the media, but your dedication is impressive.

Thank you for helping our past generations."

"It's an honor to be given this respect. I hope they made great use of the knowledge they learned in their lives."

Her smile slowly faded.

"Uh... about that..."

Rogers understood.

"It's okay to be disappointed. It's okay to feel these things. I experience that, too. And I also make mistakes.

I know people still aim for change, even if they appear misguided or affected by their world.

Maybe only some have used their knowledge properly, but even the small kinds of goodness are still something. It shows that we haven't completely lost our way, and we always have the potential to be better.

Our society is still here, and that's proof of the relentless love we have for ourselves and each other."

Marie didn't completely agree, but she was pleased.

"Thanks for that nice message. It really is better to meet you in person."

"You're welcome. I'll be speaking with other neighbors now, hope you'll be fine with that."

"Absolutely."

Rogers bowed slightly before approaching a table with the other occupants. Marie tried reaching out to another great thinker, and Heather just watched her move.

Marie's father heard about him in some TV shows and movies before, so she naturally asked a question.

"Umm, hello, are you busy?"

"Not at all. Any concerns?"

"You are Alan Watts, right?"

"Yes, you can see clearly."

"So, thoughts on life? I know you have grand ideas."

"Oh those aren't grand ideas. They are simple musings that everyone can have. They just don't get to say it out loud, until they dig deep in their psyche.

Life is simple. You live with what you have, do what you can, and die in the end anyways. There is nothing beyond that—well, except this place. And like music, we live not for the destination but to experience. To love others. To love yourself.

With the amount of knowledge we have, we often forget to zoom out and observe the vastness of our universe, to realize that despite all the hate we often entertain, we are but a grain of sand. That we're just a part of it, not something different to it.

And maybe we shouldn't overcomplicate life or make it bigger than it seems.

Maybe we shouldn't be too afraid anymore."

Marie was stunned.

"Wise words. Especially for someone who smoked a lot and misinterpreted some Buddhism."

Watts hasn't heard of snark in a long time, and he wasn't completely prepared.

"Well, misunderstanding is part of Zen as long as you're willing to grow from it, and I do like reading about Zen."

"Oh. Don't take that as an insult, sorry. I'm usually like this and your words are nice."

"Thank you. Want some tea?"

“Does everyone drink tea here?”

“Not at all, we have many kinds of black joe. There’s a coffee lounge near the center area. It’s nice but I prefer some quiet. Besides, people need stories and musings more than these drinks... unless you drink and muse at the same time. That’s right up my alley.”

Watts bantered as he took another sip of his tea, with Marie still smiling.

“Thanks, I’ll be going now.”

Watts nodded and Marie returned to Heather.

“You’re right, this place is great.”

“I told you.

Now, can we proceed to the third hall?”

“Yes please.”

Heather liked seeing Marie’s newfound enthusiasm. It was a nice break from her usual cynicism and sardonic personality. Soon enough, Heather had them teleported to another hall, and the statue now represented a leaf.

"Here's the third hall, the **Hall of Realism**. As you can tell, it's about realism. Not brutal 'honesty', pessimism, or cynicism. Realism. Not too optimistic, not too skeptical.

It does lack certain motivations, but realism is important since it guides all the other values into reality, into what's achievable. Not idealism, not performance, not just plain awareness. It's being real with yourself and others.

It doesn't only mean seeing and changing society with realism, it's about acknowledging our reality. The reality other people face, the reality you face, since there are many aspects of reality that we still don't get a hold of. Our flaws, our shortcomings, our mistakes, our inability to actually think sometimes.

In facing these realities instead of just the 'realities' we want to confront, we'll be more aware of our existence. Not only will it humble us, it will guide us to potentially better solutions. It will make us acknowledge and accept ourselves, others, and our universe more."

Marie was amazed but also amused since Heather kept trying to be deep with the lectures. She was, though, but it was still funny.

"Did you write overly long essays back on Earth?"

"...I, uh, maybe a bit. But they're not public.

Anyways, the thinkers here have stayed true to their values, remained honest about themselves, and they tried capturing our realities for many others to see."

After a brief moment, Heather and Marie started walking towards the hut, and after the typical procedures, they were inside. This time, there were two figures having a debate so intense, nobody would dare to go near them. Not even one great thinker like them.

The first one had experience with editorial journalism, subjected himself to poverty, joined noble causes during his time, and was cynically honest about his views on society. The second one was also honest about himself, his flaws, and his pursuit of the truth using fiction, but he was more focused on tech.

"1984 better."

"Fahrenheit better."

It was Orwell and Bradbury, having yet another small argument over which novel was written better. Of course everyone didn't want to go near this.

Marie had to comment like usual.

"They don't seem like good role models."

Heather had anticipated that wisecrack.

"Yeah, sometimes they have petty debates, but overall they're good people."

Another literary figure entered said debate.

"Hey guys, how about we focus on the real problem?"

The two changed their attention to this man.

"The whole processing stage is still complete BS. I think it should be reformed entirely."

Bradbury didn't want to hear this yapping again.

"Says you. We all got here the same way. And you're the only one whining."

"Nuh uh, there are other people here who probably have the same idea."

"Cry about it."

Orwell joined in.

“Guess there’s something we can agree on, Brad. Why don’t we just say BOTH are better?”

Bradbury was interested in Orwell’s change of mind.

“Better than what?”

“Better than Metamorphosis.”

Kafka couldn’t handle the disrespect to his life’s magnum opus. He did what he had to do.

“Screw you all.”

He stormed off the hut, and the two shook their hands. Mockingly of course, they weren’t done with this yet.

Marie realized that another woman had observed the whole ordeal. It was Maya Angelou, who told Marie her intellectual conclusion about this.

“Look at all these people, stupid am I right?”

“Did you just call Orwell stupid?”

“That’s not even his real name, so I didn’t.”

“What?”

Then Marie remembered the Wikipedia page for Orwell.

“Oh yeah, right.”

“Want to read actual literature?”

“I’m still unprocessed, but I’ll try checking out your work soon enough.”

“No biggie.”

Angelou’s wristwatch just beeped.

“Damn it, I have to lecture another set of newgens. Peace out y’all.”

Marie watched as Angelou left, which prompted her to ask Heather.

“Who was that?”

“Maya Angelou. You don’t know her? Civil rights author who joined MLK and Malcolm?”

“...I have no idea. At all.”

“Jesus Christ, did you fail all your history tests?”

“No.

I just failed nine of them in my entire life.”

Heather scoffed.

“Of course. Now can we start on the next hall?”

“Wait-wait-wait. Can’t we just teleport IN the huts?”

“That’s a major protocol breach. Besides, teleportation is restricted to certain places in the Halls of Fame. You can’t just do it anywhere you want here.

If you violated the protocol somehow, the punishment would revoke your clearance and force you to redo the Halls of Development.”

“Yikes, just for that?”

"Yeah. We don't want people randomly teleporting inside structures without permission. And it would also hinder logistics a bit, if many people do the same for one place."

"...Okay?"

"Let's just teleport to the next hall."

A few configurations later, they reappeared in another hall center, with the statue representing a shield.

"This is the fourth one, the **Hall of Integrity**. This value is not only about being true to your beliefs, it's sacrificing for the greater good, committing to accountability, and contributing tangible actions to society.

This is where you use your knowledge, self-love, and realism to develop actual things, instead of just sticking to cognition. Don't get me wrong, the occupants in those previous halls still did something for society, but there's more emphasis here.

The value does lack emphasis on direct help for others. But integrity is where your action starts. If you apply your values to almost every aspect of your character, this will naturally evolve into your actions.

Integrity shows you aren't just performing and you aren't just using labels to cope with a shallow identity. You're embracing your words and you're actually applying them to life. Not just your life, but for others, too."

Marie was tired of making weak snarks; this was just good food for thought. And she didn't want to disrespect Heather. It was better to listen.

"Let's check the hut for this place, as usual."

After a walk and the guest ID thing, they were suddenly greeted by an old woman, probably from the military because of that uniform. She spoke to Marie, knowing Heather was a handler with that tablet.

"Welcome to the Hall of Integrity. I'm Grace Hopper, one of the prominent figures here and for the development of COBOL. You probably read about that in your school."

"COBOL... is that some, car company?"

Hopper wasn't liking it. Marie had to keep guessing.

"A robot... model?"

"...It's one of the earliest programming languages. The stuff that makes your computers run."

Heather barged in.

"Yeah, and it's a computer language only used by fossils, which she didn't even create."

Hopper lowered her eyebrows towards the handler.

"Thank you for that wonderful description.

By the way, I made the first ever compiler. And there's FLOW-MATIC. Don't forget that."

The navy lady switched her attention back to Marie.

"Come on, women not knowing women? We really are underrepresented in our society."

Another woman stepped in. She was a scientist in the hut. The scientist.

"Exactly sis. No wonder women don't advance enough on Earth. Even we have issues with each other."

Marie needed a rebuttal towards the woman scientist.

“Or because men keep taking up everything.”

“That’s the main reason, but the fact that you don’t know us? That’s a sign.”

“Your name?”

“Marie Curie.”

“My name’s also Marie. Coincidence.”

“Thanks for the insight, slightly less aware Marie.”

Yet another woman joined the ongoing conversation.

“You gals are underrepresented? Look. At. Me.”

Everyone in that hut didn’t know this Ada Lovelace bloke. Not even Hopper or Curie.

“Yeah, who are you again?”

“Exactly.

Screw you all."

As Lovelace left, one more woman entered the scene. She looked younger than the rest of the girls, though her soul endured thousands of years, just like them.

"What happened?"

Marie finally spoke again, this time to Anne Frank.

"You just missed it. Like how you missed seeing your home get freed."

"Really?"

"Not really, some of you still argue with some other religious dudes, arguing over which territory should be freer. Global superpowers are also into it.

Issue's not as bad at the moment but you can't just erase centuries of history."

Hopper was disturbed and told her thoughts to Marie.

"This conflict isn't a new thing, but the fact that it's still happening? Oh dear."

“Yeah, really sucks.”

This just in, a figure much more prominent than all of them had stepped into the hut. Hopper, Frank, and Curie started to leave.

“Shoot, he’s here.”

“I don’t wanna hear those two argue again. Can’t even understand them.”

“Yeah…”

Marie was weirded out by the reaction of those women, until she saw the bearded man. She was a bit afraid to ask something, but she gave in to her curiosity. Heather was also worried, not because of the sharp insights, but because of another fallout in this hut.

“Hey, uh, Marx, thoughts on the afterlife…?”

Marx smiled at her.

“This is the communism I always wanted our society to achieve… without the paperwork.”

“The communism you never achieved.”

Keynes said while leaning against a wall, both arms and legs crossed, his face with a cheeky grin. Marx spent his lifetime exposing realities, even endangering himself many times, so he wasn't accepting this nonchalance.

"Good point... how about you shove your CIA propaganda down someone else's throat?"

He stopped the smug display and stood straight.

"That's not propaganda, it's facts™. The 'communism' here only worked because you didn't have to care about scarcity. Easy win for you."

"Of course I cared about scarcity, we both do! We both studied how the system handles it."

"And who actually changed most of the world with their realistic ideas? Me."

Marx groaned. Heather and Marie could only watch the spectacle, switching their eyes on the two great thinkers back and forth.

"I'm not idealistic, Keynes. I'm a materialist, a bit like you. Communism isn't about an unrealistic utopia, it should give people freedom over resources so they'd actually be used efficiently and according to their needs."

"Yes. I suppose giving people like Mao freedom to 'shift' the system into 'communism' for efficiency ended well.

Your words also remind me of a capitalism flavor, maybe a Nordic model. Something that actually works and does your job for you. Perhaps you're interested?"

"Shut it."

Keynes laughed. Marx didn't like playing the role of the serious annoyed partner, and thought the other guy must be having all the fun.

"I don't think you solved the issue, you delayed it. You let it rot further. I might look stupid to you but at least my ideas didn't serve the system you obeyed. A system that was once revolutionary but now punishes people for just existing. An obsolete product that will be replaced.

My movement keeps failing not only due to ignorance, and you know that. You designed systems after all. And unfortunately for us, the masses aren't the only ones with human nature, those at the top as well.

I believe we have more potential for good, and they are clearly worse for influencing all our indifference and brutality, so we should NEVER stop calling them out."

"And rhetoric without real action won't do anything good either. Without identifying actual solutions.

You know, like shouting aimlessly with the bandwagon on the streets or joining the anarkiddies. To feel less lonely, to feel like they're serving a great purpose and not thinking deeply about it, to feel like they're finally doing something right in their life...

Or, if they're feeling fancy, they'll be making 'art' and 'critique' instead. Thinking they're special doing it. They'd probably even repeat a little history at the same time, with their 'critical thinking' and 'awareness'.

Replacement is a tall order, don't you think? Even your communist lads on Earth argue if it actually exists or not. Reforms though, at least they happened. I'm still waiting for this 'replacement' of yours. Any time now."

Keynes just smirked at his face. Time for the rebuttal.

"Look, some of my expectations were wrong but I'm still right about how it works. And how did you even get in this hall? With that deplorable mouth of yours?"

"I have no idea. Maybe the Beyond thought you needed a counterargument. Otherwise, this place would become Stalin's Union Volume 2."

"I never wanted ANY of that..."

"You know what I also didn't want? These neolibs. I hope they all end up in the Halls of Infamy."

"Seems like we have something in common.

I still loathe capitalism, even with its feats."

"I can understand. It's one reason I pursued pragmatism, things that could work in the real world. My tools would have flourished if the system had used them effectively. And, like you, some of my expectations were wrong.

I tried to SAVE the system from itself, because I always knew about its negative potentials. I knew how the rich could hoard money, and how it screwed up demand, government regulation, an actually fair economy.

You're not evil, we just have different approaches."

Marx narrowed his eyes towards his acquaintance.

"Guess we'll keep having debates like this... and I like it."

Heather exhaled while Marie wiped her forehead, before finally speaking again.

"Thank goodness my mistake solved itself.

Your Internet fans can't even end a conversation without resorting to insults, they can't think of actual responses."

Marx grinned at Marie.

"Maybe it's because they aren't as smart as they think. Need to understand real books and not just comments from 'intellectuals'. But hey, at least I have more fans."

Keynes didn't expect to be this hurt. But Marx continued.

"Still, Keynes here knows how to talk. Even with his quips. I've been in the afterlife for thousands of years and he's one of the few individuals who can actually debate with me. The best one so far.

Almost no one else dared to be close, let alone challenge my thinking, which sucked. I have to give some thanks to Keynes for being the one to do so.

He just developed this annoying persona about 40 years ago. We used to talk a lot more before this. He should have kept his old ways."

The economist scoffed lightly at Marx.

“I wanted to shift from my old professional style, try out something less weird. We can’t change the Beyond to help people on Earth, what’s there to lose?”

“Actual discourse.”

Keynes crossed his arms and did an eyeroll.

“That’s your opinion.”

Marie and Heather backed off slowly, then Marie made her typical remark.

“Guess it still isn’t solved… bye guys!”

The women dashed as fast as a roadrunner, leaving the two thinkers confused. And as soon as they got outside the radiation zone, Marie made a request.

“Next hall? So we can finish the tour already?”

“Right ahead of ya.”

Heather already prepared the escape-I mean, teleport button. They got the hell out before they could hear more lectures from two nerds rambling about global economy without anyone’s consent.

Anyways, they were on a hall center. Again. The statue represented two hearts this time, unlike the single one of Self-Love. Heather glanced at the tablet and cleared her throat before lecturing Marie.

"This is the fifth Hall of Fame: The Hall of Empathy. Now we're talking. The previous hall focuses on action, this one focuses on using action for others. It focuses more on care, equity, equality.

Empathy doesn't make us act simply to help, it makes us feel. It asks us why we're even doing these actions in the first place, why we want to direct it to others.

It tells us to consider the 'other', not just their current state but how they got to their state in the first place. Not just for individuals but societies as well.

It's easier to feel numb than feel pain for every little thing in our society. Pain can be disabling if it's too much, and unfortunately, there really is too much.

Not enough people look beyond the surface. No one thinks about the developments, the personal thoughts, the history, the desire to finally prove something in life, the regrets, the small wins.

However, we can try our best. We will never know the entirety of their minds, but maybe a short, understanding gesture can help them stand up again. Now multiply that to thousands of more doing the same.

Empathy is the key to all this disillusionment, to answer the requests of narratives begging to be seen, to pursue actions for a more compassionate world."

Marie could only stand and absorb.

"No wonder you're a handler. You're articulate, I've never seen anyone else talk about these ideas the way you do."

"You literally did a speech about my pain earlier."

"Oh. Oh yeah. Right."

"No matter how beautiful this value might appear to us, it still lacks a key aspect. That's for the sixth hall, which we'll get to later.

For now, let's check the hut."

"I wonder what shenanigans are in store for us now..."

"Just prepare yourself."

Walk. Guest ID. Inside the hut. Happy with the imagery? Hope so. I don't think you're even reading these much, so it wouldn't hurt to rush some mundane details.

Anyways, Heather and Marie saw five figures in the hut. Two of them were debating, one was confused, one was in some meditating position, and one was busy trying to read a book. These five had one thing in common: they were all people of color.

"Malcolm, I think you should consider that, if the afterlife is able to do so, we should just influence Earth without direct messages to keep their order."

Malcolm X was annoyed with King's passive approach.

"Nonsense. We already argued like this. The afterlife should STRIVE for the truth. So what if Earth plunges into chaos? Better than delusion disguised as stability."

Rosa Parks was somewhere in the middle of the two. Literally and figuratively.

"I don't know who to support, honestly."

"How about you accept the fact that we can't do anything? The Beyond can't be changed, and maybe we should make sacrifices instead of pointless bickering.

Look at me, I'm having the time of my life. The ability to sustain an infinite hunger strike."

Gandhi mentioned all of that with his eyes closed... until Malala called him out.

"Great, the LAZY Indian gets to boss us around."

Soon, a noteworthy figure came closer and attempted to resolve the situation.

"What if, instead of arguing, we negotiate? We'll have discussions AND consider that we can't do anything about the Beyond. How's that sound, guys?"

King contemplated. Malcolm had a displeased face.

"Hmm..."

"So you're trying to be a fence sitter like last time, huh?"

Then... the two softened their expressions.

"Sounds good to me."

"Yeah, actually seems nice."

Parks nodded in agreement. Malala had her thoughts about Lincoln's proposal.

"I mean it's nihilistic, and you're a white man, but I can't argue with that. You united people after all, no matter how different they were or how violent it got."

Gandhi also had "thoughts", with Malala watching nearby.

"I suggest we should meditate after each discussion."

"Yeah, just do it yourself, gramps."

"Hey! I also united people."

"We all did. And dress up already. Jesus."

Marie and Heather just stood, far enough to not bother the six figures.

"Looks like we didn't even have to talk, they started their own convos."

"...Next hall?"

"Yeah, use your tablet again."

The tablet was used again. The two were now in another hall, with the statue representing a light bulb this time. No large huts could be seen, and the hall was sparsely populated. Heather made a request.

"Come along with me."

Heather walked towards the quartzite statue and sat on the granite encirclement. The handler waved at Marie, which made her approach that place as well. As they sat near each other, they observed their environment that was accompanied by silence, save for a few footsteps.

"This is it. The sixth hall. **The Hall of Understanding**. The tour's almost done now."

"Wait, six? Just six values?

Gee, I guess humans are naturally bad. This is fewer than the Halls of Infamy."

"You want another hour of lecturing?"

"Nope."

Heather had a little chuckle, before going on with her final lecture of the day.

"Understanding. It seems like a simple word, and it's something everyone has the capacity to form. Yet it's a part of us that we're still trying to learn.

The part that still fights in the face of defeat. The part that creates meaning despite knowing that our indifferent universe designed the flaws of our life. The part that still chooses to care even with all your imperfections.

This is the part that makes us human.

The hall doesn't have a permanent leader or occupant. Not even our purest heroes and martyrs. No one knows everything since the human mind is limited, so no one understands reality or someone's life in the exact form.

No one has achieved total understanding, but we have certain aspects of it. And maybe... this is enough."

Marie's eyes glinted as she looked at Heather.

"That's... actually kinda beautiful."

The two viewed the brick roads and the trees in front of them. Marie formed a faint but honest smile, followed by Heather's. Then, the silence was broken.

"It's such a beautiful day."

Heather continued the conversation.

"Let's get a room after this."

"What?"

"I mean let's get inside the office to debrief processing. Somehow confused that for a 'room', sorry."

"Oh, okay."

Heather stood up and waited for Marie to join her. The tablet was tapped on a few times, and the women were teleported back to the hall center near the entrance.

Eventually they passed through the golden arch, they were greeted by other handlers on their departure, and Marie's floating stamp poofed out of existence.

"Huh, forgot the stamp was there in the first place."

Both saw a couple of handlers and recipients walking together through a cloud wall, getting teleported back to the Halls of Development. And they did the same.

EPILOGUE

chapter 5

As they prepared in the office, Heather began the inquiry.

“Any questions for the processing stage?”

“Not much. How does it start?”

“The procedure begins by filling up a few documents, especially consent forms and your personal information. This is done to notify the committee that we’re doing something legal, and so I won’t get fired... obviously. Personal info’s for their database.”

“Hall of Information, was it? That’s the first part?”

“Yes, I’ll be leaving you there with the supervisors while I handle a new recipient soon. You can ask them further questions and even talk to the occupants in–”

The tablet made a notification beep. Heather stopped. Marie noticed.

“Wait a minute... no...”

“What is it?”

"You were right. Turns out you're not even dead. You were misplaced due to a clerical error. These errors are VERY rare, but they happen.

Your 'cause of death' was getting your head slammed on a countertop while under the influence, during a party.

The Beyond thought your life ended, when it was just a disorder that temporarily stopped your consciousness."

"You mean coma?"

"...Oh.

It's been so long since I heard that on Earth. Maybe I've been too much of a workaholic. But I digress.

Your consciousness was erroneously retrieved while you were in a hospital. That explains the delayed arrival.

Your human body is at a funeral right now."

"WHAT?!"

"Don't worry, we can deal with this."

“Put me back THIS instant or I’ll SUE you. There has to be a bloodsucking law firm here somewhere...”

“I know how to return you to Earth, and the committee already has measures for this.

Let me explain the context first. The Beyond naturally removes the memories of someone once they return to Earth or somewhere else in the lower universe. You have to be VERY sure of this decision, even if it’s just removal of your memories here.”

Marie paused her racing thoughts after that.

“Huh...”

“I know... don’t ask how, but I think it’s done to prevent societies from plunging into chaos once they realize there’s an afterlife. A similar memory renewal is done whenever a soul gets born from some woman on Earth having intercourse... or using in vitro.”

“Okay, can we go back to the REAL problem here?”

“Oh, sorry, got carried away. These cases only happen rarely so it isn’t paid much attention by the committee.

I'll try my best to make it look like an overdue near-death experience... somehow. The time window is still viable, otherwise you'd be stuck here.

And again, the Beyond slows down time a lot. Even if this takes a week to resolve, it would only last about a few minutes on Earth."

Marie was curious about this now.

"I haven't asked, how old are you?"

"One thousand three hundred and sixty-two years old.

But if you don't adjust for time dilation, then I'm still in my late-20s. About two years have passed on Earth since I began my processing stage.

Got in this place really early. Just like you, except you're not actually dead."

Marie wanted to ask the real question.

"So how do I get out?"

Heather opened an app. Then, a portal materialized, and it looked like a familiar Earth object.

“Okay... a door.”

“It can be customized. You can change it to something like a blue portal, but I like a door.

Saw it in a couple of TV shows and a movie once. Plus it’s simple. Why not?”

She sensed something from Heather. It was there, just barely noticeable. The handler spoke again.

“You’ll go back to Earth, right?"

“Hmm... the afterlife seems nice, if you aren’t in hell, but the purgatory? I mean, decades of learning? You don’t get paid. You can’t even travel to places with that. And I still have my family and friends on Earth, I’d want to-”

Marie saw Heather’s expression change.

“Oh... maybe it won’t be that bad if I stay-”

“No-no, sorry. Sorry about that. I have to commit to my job, and you have your choice.

Still, I wish we could have spent more time here... but you do you.”

Marie glanced away then focused on Heather again.

“You won’t feel bad if I go back?”

“A healthy relationship is built on trust and respect for the other, even if a free choice would end it. At least it’s not a toxic relationship.

But… I’d be lying if I said I won’t feel bad. Of course I’ll feel a bit bad, seeing the only person who helped me leave too soon. Maybe I’d feel bad that I wasn’t enough.

Then again, you already helped me. And I’m not the only person in your life.”

There was a short pause before Heather continued.

“So yeah… I guess this entire experience we had with each other, all gone in your head, poof. And I’ll still be here, remembering everything.”

“But you won’t meet me once I go back. Many possible purgatories I could end up to, thousands of yea–”

“I know. But I’m a handler, and any recipient should be treated with neutrality. There was clearly an error, and you should have a choice. It’s not mine to dictate.

Besides, we can always meet at the Hall of Self-Love when you die for real. There's a coffee lounge near the center. Good place for my off time.

Just, don't forget where it is."

Marie stared at that face after the lame joke, if it was even a joke. Then, Marie spoke up.

"I guess I'll go back. Yeah, I'll go back to Earth first and cherish stuff there, then I'll prepare myself. Maybe I'll even try to find you here if I can do it."

Both were smiling at each other. Marie broke the silence.

"Hope you're less of a bureaucrat when I come back."

"Yeah, and don't forget to bring your seniors card."

Her eyes lingered at the handler, and Marie thought of something stupid.

"Bonsoir, Heather."

Heather finally made good use of her training.

"It's 'Au revoir, Heather'. Get it right."

"Jesus Christ, I'll just leave already."

Marie headed for the door, then turned around. Thinking her last words sounded harsh, Marie stated...

"I'll see you in the afterlife. When we're both ghosts. Again."

Heather chuckled.

Marie paused and had one more look. The office. The tablet. Heather.

She entered the portal. The door was closed.

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There were two dozen chairs and people. Flowers, small spotlights, ceramic tiles, a bunch of cards and picture frames, a number of white candles, and pale-blue walls. Somebody was about to finish her speech.

"Marie taught me a lot when she was still here. She was a true friend! God... I miss her, I miss her!"

Marie opened the casket and sat upright.

The few families and peers there screamed at the top of their lungs, not sure if they should be astonished or horrified that a deceased person just came back to life. Marie, with her mind still disoriented from just waking up, wanted to ask a genuine question.

“Did somebody say my name?”

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https://soundcloud.com/joeypecoraro/tired-boy

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY

dvd extra

WALLS OF TEXT ACTUALLY RELATED TO THE NOVELLA CONTENT

Since this is the second edition of the novella, I have also radically changed this section. If you want the more bitter, misanthropic, arrogant, irritating version, you can check the earlier editions. Twitter is gonna screw me...

Here's the folder for the earlier editions.

I experienced regrets and realizations through a recent painful period, as I've predicted in the first commentary. Including the "the easy way out" thing. Maybe I'm that predictable with my patterns. I wish I handled it better and I wish I hadn't gone this route. But maybe I had to.

This is my first novella and official-like writing. I've written a lot before, but I was never this serious, even though this still looks informal and lacks actual editors.

Actual publishers, too, which authors need to propagate their messages better, with the marketing, backing, and distribution. Free stuff also doesn't seem enticing.

I guess I'll release free stuff as portfolio-ish material...

Marie is designed to be both smart (or at least aware) AND stupid at the same time. She's aware of Earth's problems but also a bit stupid occasionally, as shown

with her reactions and ignorance of history. Kinda like me except she's actually smart and competent, plus she can openly talk with her personal self.

Heather starts off as detached until she slowly warms up to Marie, going from a typical bureaucrat to a more casual companion, even while using formal terms. They likely won't meet again: they're thousands of years apart, Marie doesn't know Heather now, and millions of others are being processed in many separate purgatories. The chances are just so low.

Heather's behavior is shaped by the processing stage and her personal quirks, which is why she could just smirk at hell. Imagine looking at it for a hundred years.

She spent around 905 years getting herself processed, 3 years in the Halls of Fame (10 more for the handler training), then did volunteer work for about 416 years. This leaves 28 years, her Earth age. Heather died 2 Earth years before the novella.

Processing did help lessen inclination to boredom in the afterlife. And yes, all those calculations earlier mean 667 afterlife years per Earth year.

Heather's appearance was unconsciously inspired (no cap) by Loremaster and Lucifer from Helltaker, along with Moon from SVTFOE (and maybe Ramdaram's Nox).

I guess their traits also: Loremaster's sadism, Lucifer's sass, and Moon's professionalism, maybe her past, too.

Think about the name "Marie" along with Heather's training, knowing handlers deal with people from around the world. This will answer certain questions.

Think about the last line and its possible implications.

The afterlife isn't bad per se, but it obviously has flaws. It can feel dehumanizing to newcomers despite its equality and egalitarianism, the processing stage can be brutal since it's not aligned for everyone (similar to education systems on Earth), the Beyond can't help people on Earth, and human limitations aren't completely removed. I don't mean we should just be robots; we just need to lessen the bad stuff.

This novella happens in the far future because the halls imply that the people there already died. The people from our current time. I personally don't think we'll get that far and still be in a good state like in this novella, but for the sake of storytelling, turn off your brain for a moment. And you can still have your opinions about the future.

Marie's parents were Gen Beta. But I'm not spending too much time creating fictional slang for my worldbuilding. Not the skibidi-bop-mm-dada mogging slop. Screw you.

If you think I talk weird, just check out the terminally online. They speak like aliens, and it's not just Gen Alpha slang, I think there's political Twitter/4chan slang, too. Haven't studied them much yet. I do remember hearing the term "lolcow" from Kiwi Farms back in June 2025.

The Hall of Self-Interest is the traditional hell, with the fire and the seven deadly sins.

The progression of the Ten Halls of Infamy could serve as a partial hint for Heather's backstory.

Heather is also implied to have committed suicide. It's a potential interpretation, not a fact.

If a kid dies, their soul automatically becomes 20 years old here, in looks and intellect. People would keep their Earth appearance here, so if someone dies old, they will look old. Souls age much longer, so people who died in their 20s will still appear in their 20s despite spending centuries here... until they look old soon enough.

Heather doesn't have a close friend in the afterlife despite the 416-year tenure because of many possible reasons: relationships being discouraged in that line of work, most recipients treating her like a pencil pusher, Heather being broken or too "different", personal choice, decades of work can numb handlers, plus Heather's in

her 20s which is weird for an afterlife filled with seniors, though there is a growing population of younger souls.

Another thing: sex doesn't exist in my afterlife. They're just souls (with less human limitations) and I'm mainly an aroace writer. To normal people who like sex and love: womp womp.

Hall naming conventions are like this: H_Dev_Info or H_Infa_Nihil-1. If you somehow want to make fanfics, try following these... or not.

Parts 2 and 3 aren't actually shorter. Heather got carried away and didn't expect the delays.

A good alternative to the ending music would be Porter Robinson's "Goodbye To A World", Rex Orange County's "4 Seasons", maybe even Don McLean's "Vincent". They're copyrighted though, so if you want to be classy, try Chopin's "Concerto 1 in E Minor, Op. 11, Mov. 2", which was also featured in two films, one indie and one major blockbuster. The indie film took me years to appreciate more, while I never found the blockbuster special to me.

UPDATE: After all the stuff Trump has been doing, I think it's more than okay to call him out now. Like he's been

doing so much lately. And not just lately, there's his first term, too. I still have to learn more about that, and this is just my personal opinion.

I still didn't place him in the novella because I thought the examples in the Halls of Infamy were already enough (like how I put politicians in the Hall of Self-Interest) and I didn't know where and how to put the name properly.

I purposefully left out certain people like Trump and Bernie. Modern events are still developing, and I have to learn more about these things. You probably won't like that. I guess I won't like browsing through thousands of resources either.

I did enter a ton of current names, but I feel like handling stuff like Trump and Bernie feels wrong with incomplete knowledge. They're sensitive topics, and I still have to learn more rather than resorting to cheap name-drops and substituting it with shallow critiques, just because I don't know much. Maybe I still did that here though.

You can say I'm pulling punches, and I'd agree with you. But I think I poked enough sacred cows that I might have irritated pretty much everyone already.

Many people are already taking shots at Trump, maybe even Bernie (not just by the far-right). It's boring to regurgitate those kinds of "critiques", even if they might be useful. People are already doing it for me, and they likely know more.

Another note: IDF was not intended to be referenced here, no, but you won't trust me anyways. I just wanted to point that out... and maybe cause a Streisand effect.

Before you point at me about the Catholic Church, check again: the novella mentioned SPECIFIC PERSONNEL of the Catholic Church, NOT the Catholic Church. Some people actually think the whole organized religion thing is complete mumbo jumbo, so I'm being generous there. I didn't demonize or glaze religion, I tried to balance it.

There are other possible interpretations and ideas that I have deliberately not shared to keep things interesting, for readers who want to construct their own narratives. Either that or I haven't found them yet. I like to keep my writings open-ended to a degree.

As for the plot holes you (and I) spotted, I have two words: piss off. I ain't reworking this entire thing.

UPDATE: I did rework this entire thing.

By the way, a reread may uncover early hints for the plot and my interpretations.

WALLS OF TEXT ABOUT THE NOVELLA

The first result you see when you look up "Hall of Infamy" is the one from Fairly Oddparents, a show I watched when I was in public middle school. But suck it, the phrase isn't copyrighted. And I like the phrase, it came up when I was brainstorming.

There are a lot of pop culture references here, ranging from very subtle or obscure (even I might forget them while rereading) to clear-as-glass obvious, with the Halls of Fame being the main highlight. One reference could be for a TV show, a film, a game, a sport, a song or an artist, even Internet culture. I won't spoonfeed so you have to find out yourself :)

But I'll give a major example anyways. The ending is similar to Vanilla Sky's (I guess with the theme in general), and it even uses a line said by David Aames with a few tweaks. You can also check out the original Spanish movie and its director. Heard it was better. Gemini Home Entertainment and TheSunVanished are also referenced here, for you OGs out there.

I also realized that this novella might appear similar to Severance, Rick and Morty, The Little Prince (or just the movie, haven't read the novella much yet), The Good Place, and Black Mirror... except I didn't have those in my

mind when I thought of the ideas, and I didn't like them much. But I haven't watched them enough anyways.

Hitchhiker's might feel familiar, but I haven't read it much yet. And I'm still planning to check out The Office, both the UK and the US version.

UPDATE: I checked out the first few episodes of the US version... not a fan. Maybe it gets good after some more?

I didn't find Bojack Horseman that special to me after bingewatching the whole thing last summer, though some parts did hit. I watched the two seasons of Twin Peaks, but I was disappointed since I expected more surrealness like those Rusty Lake games (which were heavily inspired by it). Spirited Away is a nothingburger to me, but maybe a rewatch of that movie and Bojack would make me appreciate them more.

You might see some Brazil too, except I only read about the movie. And maybe it's just typical lefty media that doesn't offer much constructive things and self-critique, just another one in the line of "thought-provoking art" masquerading as unique insight.

At least Huxley thought of alternatives with their pros and cons when he talked about his Brave New World. At least Mr Robot exists... or not. If you know, you know.

At least Orwell thought more about how revolutions tend to be messy: people overthrow the oppressors, they

have trouble thinking of clear solutions next, infighting happens, and they may repeat the cycle or even make it worse soon enough.

I'm not saying revolution is always like this, since there are still good and successful kinds, like movements that fought colonialism and fought for human rights. I'm just saying there tends to be a pattern we should be wary of.

Animal Farm points it out for the Russian Revolution, but it can be seen in others like the French one (which Marx studied), the German one, Chinese one, Cuban, Spanish, Iran, Cambodia, maybe the American, CHAZ, and Libya too? Systemic issues also play a part in worsening the effect. And without solid plans afterwards? Dysfunction only gets replaced by another one.

I personally believe that novella can be applied to almost every ideology, especially with unchecked or centralized power. Ideologies are created by humans, and human nature is susceptible to mistakes or failures. Human nature is also susceptible to reaction, impulses, and irrationality in the face of emotionally intense events. Even I'm proof of that, despite being aware of it.

I was writing a short story when Dante's work was being discussed in my class, which felt familiar, and the idea for that short story was based on a dream I had years ago. Somehow, this ended up being more interesting than my original story, at least to me. I actually enjoyed writing it more (perhaps spending too much time on it),

even though I had a lot more stories I wanted to design and write before this college output.

For me, the novella is more like Mr Robot, Silicon Valley, or The Twilight Zone crossed with Spongebob, Gravity Falls, or South Park/The Boondocks. Maybe even Dilbert (haven't read it much yet) or the game Clinical Trial. And again, this is based on Dante's work. I don't even know what I just said there.

Yume 2kki may have been a subconscious inspiration. Try checking out its music.

There's also Paper Toss, a defunct game I used to play when I was new to mobile phones. It had such a stupid and basic premise yet it's brilliant at the same time. And the idea of a game set in mundane environments just feels comfy. You can get its APK in stuff like Aptoide.

Mr Robot might appear heavy-handed and melodramatic to you but at least it had self-critique and used nuance, both for its protagonists and antagonists. It shows that real life doesn't always have a clear good vs evil.

I like older South Park not because it's always agreeable but because it's more thought-provoking. I see stances that I don't see elsewhere, and they're more interesting to study. New episodes just shove stuff I already know,

stuff many other shows already do. It's not exactly bad if you're pushing for change, but it's boring. They've had this show for over 20 years, so I can see why. The show's seasonal rot was slow, too, so they did well.

You don't need subscription services and you don't need to buy a lot of media to understand these references. You know what I mean. While you're at it, try checking out Mary and Max, Team America, The Dictator, and The Inbetweeners (on Youtube).

Even with all the references and inspirations (whether I was aware or not aware of them while writing), I think the story is more influenced by how I usually think and construct dialogues, with subconscious influence from media I've known throughout my life. Been writing my own stuff for a decade now, starting with dumb comic strips to actually comprehensible writings... I think...

I read some Bradbury during my elementary days using English books given by my public school, and maybe they crept back. I've reread them in the 2020s so I guess that's the reason. I discovered 1984 from replaying a childhood game called Bookworm Adventures Vol 2, packed with a lot more literary references. RIP old PopCap, screw EA for messing up game studios.

ERB, Bill Wurtz, Tomska/Eddsworld, Emplemon's older video essays, Internet Historian's older vids, and Don

Hertzfeldt exist. There's also Jack Stauber and Daria. YTPs likely played a part in darkening my sense of humor. Soul is a recent movie with similarities, but aside from that and maybe Coco, modern Pixar sucks.

I'm personally not a fan of "quirky" characters in modern animation and storytelling. You know what I mean. There are terms like "millennial writing" to pinpoint it.

These characters seem desperate for trends, trying to be unique when they're really just generic. They use forced drama to "connect" with the audience, serving as tools for "depth". But I guess that's being elitist, people can still conjure their stories in a way that's comfortable for them, and they still have their own backgrounds.

AIMLESS SHOUTING INTO THE VOID

So... I might have predicted a few things while I was out.

I put Venezuela a month before it got screwed by the US. Iran was written here two months before US screwed them again. I wrote that I might feel awful if other people observe me the way I do, and I started another novella with an ending where the protag gets a similar demise... three months before I got a crash due to that feeling.

And since I put The Dictator and Mr Robot in here a while back, you might have noticed they're relevant. Again.

Funnily enough, I was working on a tech-noir serial from September last year and I randomly picked the place "Minneapolis" for the "pilot episode" because I thought the place sounded and seemed unique. And I finished the spec script for that during December 25, 2025. Guess what happened in that area after New Years celebration.

Back in August 2025, I wrote a short story that involved bioweapons... months later, some bioweapon news was reported in the US. I also got to learn French the next semester without basic lessons.

Since this keeps happening, I'll say: Great Depression 2.0 might happen, China will work with Russia and North Korea to make the authentic 1984 experience, a Suez crisis, a European refugee crisis, or some 9/11 or terror attack in the US might happen... again...

I know what you're saying: yes, the political figures I put here, including Thatcher, have made more reforms and systemic changes than me. While I just write.

Remember how I promised to study and restudy a bunch of history and global politics I listed in the first edition? You don't? Don't worry, it never happened anyways. It's still in my to-do list though, if I can even finish it soon.

Anyways, back to this... I'll just list some patterns again.

I think there's a pattern where some art and its message become the focus of the public, while discussions about the message don't get much attention.

For example, a film does a "touching" critique or satire of a topic. The film may simplify or not reveal a bunch of things, for the consumption of the general audience or to make it more entertaining and not overly long. The film gets awards and a lot of attention worldwide. The masses are moved and they keep the message in their hearts. I've observed it for years now.

What they might not see or keep in mind are the other discussions about the film. There are critics and online forums who say that the topic is more complicated than what is shown in the film. Not everyone thinks of this.

The general audience thinks of the film's message alone and not take other things into consideration. Sure, some might consider the other things but the majority might not and the message will be the main focus to them. And

probably for a long time. They might even dismiss these people for “thinking too much”. Getting Oscar-baited.

I feel like showrunners and filmmakers can make their art fit their narrative and biases using their characters and plots. This can be annoying, like they’re showing that they’re right by forcing the audience to think their way, not checking counterarguments and other perspectives.

Bias is unavoidable but it can be managed. I have my own biases, of course, but I try to be aware of it and I still try to check counterarguments. I think we should do that more, especially close-minded people of the left, right, and even center. I’ve been close-minded a lot myself.

I guess stuff will only work if all or most sides want to cooperate regardless of differences. It’s much harder if others remain close-minded, which can tempt you to do the same. Maybe we should focus less on picking a “side” and more on picking actual stances. Seeing things as “sides” just worsen issues like binary thinking and groupthink. At least in my opinion.

As I said earlier, I’m not a fan of these quirky characters. So I made up my own rule for it: The Rule of Quirk. The quirkier the character, the more “tragic” their backstory would be. But maybe I’m projecting again...

I've made another rule for this kind of storytelling: The Hotline Miami Effect. It just means that some media, usually an indie or arthouse, is seen as good mainly because of the flashy material and the mass reactions. It typically involves topics like cyberpunk, vaporwave, a form of (shallow) leftism, or other seemingly "status-quo-defying" or "gritty" or "edgy" topic there is.

The topics are still good for discussion in our current world, but I feel like they're for generic cash grabs now or for shallow discourse. I know systemic issues are involved, and creative ideas aren't infinite/always good, but I still wish creators would try better if they can.

This effect can be applied to a game like Katana Zero or Data Wing, a movie like Don't Look Up or Joker, or a show like Breaking Bad (it's not terrible, just overrated for me + BCS is better) or Helluva Boss.

Hotline Miami, Data Wing, and Katana Zero aren't that bad (I like the music, the games are just kinda mid) and I don't think they're directly leftist; they actually try to attack everyone, literally and figuratively, showing that human nature is in all of us.

I'm not part of the toxic anti-woke people (had a minor phase during the pandemic), but I also dislike certain aspects of the left (used to be commie-ish who didn't know much about history and the ideology when I first learned politics). And I know centrism has its own good and bad. There are terms like moderates, independents, and apolitical, too. And I still have to learn a lot more.

Just sharing, I'm a bit more of a Keynes guy when it comes to systemic changes: government rework, focus on vital systems first (i.e. healthcare, job market, energy sector, transportation, waste management, education), much better market regulation, more social welfare... seemed obvious enough in that part.

I still have to learn more about the dude though, pros and cons. I've studied his work with Bretton Woods over a year ago, and the system wasn't really in favor of him.

Regulatory capture is also bad and you have to make sure most of the gov'nos play along. Maybe more GOs and NGOs watch them, with civic engagement amplified by platforms and transparency measures.

And of course, there should be improvement in the government structure itself, since they're the starting point: business influence, corruption, information flow, candidates, budgets, elections... but I don't know much.

I still think Marx is smart, his frameworks and concepts being clichés in modern society are still good since the masses can know complex ideas now, even if ideological rigidity will be here forever.

Humans with their desire to be validated and their need to belong. Even I'm not immune from that pattern. Maybe we never really developed from our caveman days.

I also know that nuanced progression doesn't always work and sometimes there should be something faster or more radical, such as phasing to renewable energy

more, AI regulations, or facing totalitarian structures, be it from "people's republics" like in North Korea and China (Nepal was a recent ousting, I'll study it along with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Venezuela; I'll also restudy the French Revolution, 9/11, and Arab Spring), or from "free markets" like in the US and I guess Japan, South Korea, and the UK too.

Funny thing is, I haven't actually read both their works much, so I'm the real joke here. But then again, I'm not the only one. Maybe Jreg hasn't read everything from them, as implied with his Extremist Book Review video. He's got a good point there near the end of the video.

UPDATE: I've read a bit more and revamped that part.

I think the origin of cookie-cutter, binary storytelling started with propaganda from the World Wars and the Cold War. But history will keep surprising me and it's likely older, maybe Rome and the French were in it. I guess religion's one of them. The cavemen, too.

A lot of stories focus more on flash and emotions since it's difficult to go for actual substance, in my opinion. They don't really ask the real questions.

Then again, life circumstances. Creative freedom usually gets screwed by upper management, audiences/career pressures, personal backgrounds, knowledge levels, coordination or conflicts with other people, and human tendencies to make oversights.

We still have our own strengths and weaknesses. I might write and nitpick a lot, but I still suck at a ton of other things. People have their own writing styles, too.

I like older books (and thinkers) because they usually have more nuance, depth, self-critique, and openness to discussion and counterarguments compared to our tabloid-like polarization culture now, sustained by the system and even ourselves.

The old ones still have flaws (some thinkers I put here don't have the best track record) and may not be that applicable to newer times, but they can be overlooked.

My writing style is deliberately designed to limit explicit content as proof that you don't need sex, drugs, violence, and swearing to explore mature topics or humor... even though I know tons of swears and I laughed at a million sex jokes already. And there's the fact that I talked about people like Hitler here, then all those punishments...

You get the point. It's good for academia, acceptable by general audiences, and maybe even digestible by kids. Other works have done it before, too: The Simpsons, Mr Rogers, The Twilight Zone, Star Trek/Star Wars, Regular Show, and Gravity Falls.

I think another design choice I like to use is trying to make the mundane look more interesting. You don't need

wacky adventures, romance, direct villains, fight scenes, reliance on pop culture and meta-humor, or a clear good and evil. You don't always need them for an interesting story. Trying to write more naturally can be better.

So many creations just want to be the next Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Gravity Falls. Not everything has to be like these things.

People usually want to break free from the status quo, but a lot of people do so and they've been doing this for quite some time now, so much that we already know certain archetypes in many modern shows. I know art has always repeated itself, but yeah.

The dysfunctional family, the hyperactive girl, the cold stoic boy, the snarky sardonic side character, the anime-villain-type antagonist, and there's the butt of the jokes.

These characters are now the status quo and we've seen too many of them already. I personally think we should try to diversify our characters and limit overused tropes.

Again, everyone has their own styles and it's not easy being creative, with career pressures and the limited good ideas. I still want to see them try better though, and I'm not the only one with this sentiment.

I have yet to see more shows that challenge themselves and create stories where nothing over-the-top happens, like Beavis and Butthead and KOTH.

Again, I guess this is just them wanting to get recognition and of course, paying the bills.

Nuance is a core design principle I put in my writings, but that doesn't mean I straight up ignore the black-and-white aspects... even though I cope with nuance...

While there are tons of nuances and complexities in life, some things are undeniably better or worse than others, and sometimes there are no middle grounds. Unhealthy ideas need to be discouraged, but even that's debated.

Don't just analyze what people say but also why: their inner world, their past, the audience and context at the time, recent struggles, unconscious insecurities, even sleep schedules, if they have any...

I might say all these things but I'm not perfect like you. I still have failures upholding my ideals, I still have a lot to learn, I'm still very flawed, and I've said a lot of awful things in the past. I guess what's more important is that I want to be better now, as much as I can. Even if I'll keep messing up at times.

UPDATE: Yep, I messed up big time. As predicted. I'm just trying my best now, even though I reset the progress sometimes. Maybe I shouldn't call it reset, more like "I'm less wrong now compared to a day ago". It's still difficult.

V2.2.00

Total Word Count, according to MS Word (only Chapter 1-5): **18,406**

Chapter 1: **1,039**

Chapter 2: **5,175**

Chapter 3: **3,877**

Chapter 4: **7,135**

Chapter 5: **1,180**

Last tally: **Sep 6 2026, 8:59 PM**

Yes. This was made in Microsoft Word. Even the cover. You can clearly see.

Unrelated but I'll plug my Medium here, if you want more stories like this.

A visit would be appreciated, but no pressure ;)

https://medium.com/@vince.averny1032

Not a virus/phishing link

The Deep States are all around us...

719

Marie wakes up in an office that turned out to be the afterlife. Guided by Heather, a volunteer handler, she learns about the different subareas of hell, purgatory, and heaven, along with the lives of the people around her.

Want to learn more? Read this deadpan, contemporary retelling of Dante's Divine Comedy... except there is actual comedy. If you find the stuff funny, that is.